She was eighteen but dressed herself like she was the principal. Her long brown hair was done up in a neat bun. Her spectacles glistened as if they were freshly cleaned- they always were. Her blouse and slacks were conservative and professional. Most passing her on the street assumed she was some highly paid lawyer or politician. That wasn't the case- not yet, anyway- but she relished the image she presented to the world.

"Some of the seniors are talking about their senior prank, Madame President… they want to spray paint the side of the building with hopes and dreams for the future."

"Absolutely not." She said sharply. "It will reflect badly on us." She tapped the desk with her pencil, thinking deeply. "Issue a warning stating that however partakes in such an endeavor will be disciplined."

"Yes, Madame."

She was watching with pleasure as her orders were carried out when the phone rang. She answered it, balancing her pencil neatly between her fingers as she raised the phone to her ear.

"Yes?"

"This is Principal Pauper. I'm a little hungover… could you have a girl bring me some water?"

She rolled her eyes and hung up the phone. When she had finished with her real work, she cleaned her things and informed her secretary she would proceed with her daily inspection of the school.

"Yes, of course Madame." Stella said brightly. "I'll hold down the fort while you're gone."

She was a senior, too, which concerned her. Her cabinet was entirely comprised of people she had met throughout her four years here, and although they had accomplished a lot there was an uneasy feeling about what would happen after they all graduated. She had

been thinking about that a lot, lately… how the school would be run once she was gone.

It was the class president's responsibility to oversee the facility to ensure that everything was in order. She spoke to students and teachers, observed lesson plans, took notice of concerns on both sides, and worked tirelessly to correct anything amiss.

Sarah spent today's inspection time focusing on a potential expansion to the chemistry lab… a major goal of her administration was expanding the program to push their students into even more cutting edge fields.

"A lot of our boys are already at the top of their field." The teacher, Mr. Hayes informed her. "There simply isn't much more room to grow."

In the past year the school has become famous for its high amount of young specialists in this field that outperformed those with decades of experience.

"That is no reason to stop working." She said coldly, staring up at him. "We cannot allow our program to stagnate simply because of our reputation."

"I'm just saying." He drawled, his eyes glancing over to a young bespectacled boy staring into a microscope. "It wouldn't hurt our boys to have a little more fun, would it?"

She bit back her tongue. An uneasy feeling was welling up inside of her, but now was not the time to express it.

"Study isn't meant to be fun." She said. "They can have fun on their own time. They need to have their lives figured out, now." She tried to keep her voice cool, to mask the growing feeling of dread within her.

"You're too hard on them, Sarah." He told her. "People study and work so they can have fun with the people they love." His eyes fell

on the boy again, and he smiled warmly. “If you take the promise of having fun away from them… what do they have left to look forward to?”

Sarah did not answer. She stood in silence, watching the boy intently. He was not looking their way, his attention fixated squarely on his instruments.

“These boys are attending the premier school in the country.” Hayes told her. “They will be leading the world’s top scientists forty years from now, you mark my words.”

There was no more discussion to be had. Most of her concerns had been heard. She was led to the door and shown out by a smiling Mr. Hayes. She turned back to face him.

“I will continue pressing you on this, Hayes.”

“I know you will.” He said, still smiling, and closed the door in her face. She stiffened, her lip curling up upward into a grimace. She stared at the window in the door and stepped forward, her fist raised to bang on the door. Her eyes saw through the window pane, and her heart stopped cold.

Mr. Hayes had already returned to the desk. The boy looked up at him. Hayes leaned forward, and kissed him on the lips.

Sarah felt sick. She saw the boy recoil, clear visible disgust on his face, as the older man whispered something to him. He nodded, his expression grim, and turned away. He glanced to the window, and saw Sarah there, watching them.

She couldn’t bear it anymore. She turned and left.

She did not finish the rest of her inspection: She returned to her office to find Stella the secretary at her desk.

“You’re back earlier than expected, Madame President.” She said, surprised, as Sarah stepped into the room. It was all she could do to stop herself from stomping her heel into the ground in frustration.

Sarah did not answer her. She was glowering so badly that Stella knew something was wrong.

“Did something happen?” She pressed. “Do we need to take action?”

“We do.” She said, her voice heavy. “But it very may well be beyond our power.”

Hayes’ method of abuse was simpe: Promise his students to introduce them to colleagues in high paying fields. An internship right out of high school would put them on the fast track to becoming successful. And Hayes was very, very good at making do on his promises. The academy operated on a merit based system and was, by its nature, extremely competitive. The sort of person who would attend here was the sort who would do absolutely anything to do succeed, at any cost to themselves… and often, others.

Hayes could not be removed from his position: None of the faculty had any problem with what he was doing. Some even supported it, finding it cute, and a good learning experience for boys. The majority, however, cared not one way or the other. It did not concern them. They had their own problems to worry about.

She was one of the very few who had been working very hard to get Hayes removed from his position, while retaining the talent and resources that his skill and expertise had brought to the school. It was very possible that if she acted, to the full extent of her power, that his supporters would speak out against her… and perhaps, successfully remove her from office.

It was a difficult situation. But she relished it. She had never felt more alive as she paced back and forth in her office, deep in thought. It was true that the relationship was consensual… it was being done in exchange for a service.

But it was predatory, and it was wrong. If there were better alternative pathways to Hayes’ resources than simply submitting to

him… they would surely be taken.

She had no choice, she thought grimly, as she sat down at her desk, pencil raised. She was going to have to draft ideas.

She began by trying to directly contact all of Hayes connections. She thought it was possible that there were those in his circle that would support her. But she found herself rebuked at every turn. As much power as she wielded on campus, it was difficult to get people who did not answer directly under her to take her seriously. On top of that, she had been asking around about Hayes throughout her entire term: his colleagues must have been warned away from her.

Next she tried making a list of all the students she knew had been abused. There had been the boy she just seen, Bartholomew, along a handful of others, all boys. Hardly any girls attended Hayes' program. He seemed to almost go out of his way to drive them out of the field. He hated women more than anything, although he worked very hard to hide it.

Her head was spinning. She stood up and made her way for the door.

"I'm taking a break." She told Stella. "Hold down the fort."

"Will do." She chirped. Sarah stepped out of the room, out the door, and walked around the side of the building. She had simply wanted some air, but now that she was out she felt more trapped than ever. She felt as if she were running away from her problems.

She hated the feeling, but knew it was necessary. She couldn't work near constantly like she wanted, she had to take a break. It infuriated her.

Her heels clicked as she walked down the hallway. Everyone else was in class. There wasn't a soul in sight. That was good…. Because it wouldn't do for the student body to see their president slacking. But it disappointed her too. She often found herself feeling as if she never quite fit in with the rest of the student body.

She stepped out into the courtyard, half expecting it to be completely empty, as the hall had been, but was surprised to see a boy her own age standing there, leaning against the wall.

He was tall and handsome- perhaps overly so. She felt a little intimidated as he turned to look at her.

“Good afternoon.” Sarah said stiffly. She had to greet him. If word got out that she was rude to another student it would ruin her reputation.

“Hey.” He said, his voice cool. “Shouldn’t you be in class?”

He didn’t recognize her. She didn’t like that at all. Did she really leave such a little impression? She had been president for all four years she had been here.

“Shouldn’t you?” She challenged him. He shook his head.

“I only go to school here for baseball.” He said. “They don’t want me taking any classes.” His voice was low and bitter. Sarah stared at him, a little taken aback for a moment, before her instincts as class president took over.

“I am Class President Sarah Carnell.” She said, placing a hand over her chest. “If you have any complaint about the school, I will do everything in my power to help you.”

He looked at her.

“The Class President…” He repeated. “You have the power to do that, as a student?”

“Yes.” She said. “And don’t change the subject.”

He laughed. She felt her face flush. She almost felt like he wasn’t taking her seriously. She hated that, whenever it happened. It was true that she was still a student, but she had real power and influence around the school. Helping students was the entire purpose of her role.

“I’m not sure there’s anything you can do.” He said. “I spent my entire life playing ball, and end up here. I’m expected to help the team win a world title, and they don’t really care what happens to me after that.”

“You’re worried about your education.” She observed.

He nodded. “I can’t keep up with anything I’ve tried.” He confessed. “They tell me it isn’t a big deal, but-“

“They, meaning the faculty?” She asked sharply. He nodded. “Don’t listen to them.” She said dismissively. “You need an education, regardless of what they tell you.” She frowned at him. “Hm. Perhaps I can arrange for you to take classes at the regular high school-“

“I want a good education.” He said. “That’s why I came here.”

“I understand.” Sarah said, quickly. His lack of education aside, the boy seemed to genuinely want to better himself. Her heart ached for him- if he truly was only allowed to go to school here to play baseball, then doubtless the faculty did not want him distracted with anything else. To them, his future simply did not matter.

“Listen to me.” She said. “We can work this out, I’m sure. Contact my office and I’m sure I can find a way to help you.”

He looked at her- Sarah worried for a brief moment that he wasn’t going to take her up on her offer, before he gave her a small smile.

“Alright.” He said warmly. “I’m Raphael Hawk. Keep an eye out for me…. Alright?”

“I will.” She said. “Raphael… keep your chin up, alright? You’re doing the right thing.”

She didn’t want to stand in the garden alone with him. So she had to go back into the building entirely. She hadn’t gotten to take her break, but she somehow felt even more refreshed.

She shouldn't have even considered taking a break. She thought to herself bitterly. Not when there were so many people like Raphael who still needed help. She had to work harder.

"You're back early." Stella said in surprise as Sarah came back into the office. Sarah did not answer her as she stepped back into her office, and closed the door behind her.

…

Raphael raised the schedule to his face and squinted at it. He turned and stopped in front of the door. "Is this it?" He wondered aloud. He checked it again, to make sure that this was the right place, and then he reached for the door and pulled it open.

"Can I help you?" Mr. Hayes asked politely as he entered.

"Yeah… I'm new here, and-"

"Ahhhh you must be Raphael!" He said warmly, as he came around the table and held out his hand to him. Raphael flinched. The hand was overly familiar.

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Hayes said jovially, as he took him by the arm and led him into the room. "I understand that you're a big deal already? Baseball, isn't it?"

He gave Raphael's arm a friendly squeeze. Raphael flinched, and yanked his arm away from him.

"Yeah." He said. "It's the only reason I'm here."

Hayes smiled widely at him. He did not seem deterred by Raphael's attitude.

"Well." He said. "Why don't you have a seat and relax. I've had a look at your file and know that you have no background in chemistry… is that correct?"

"Yeah."

“Well that’s no trouble. No trouble at all. Just sit there and watch the other boys work. You won’t have to do a thing.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that.” Raphael said. “I want to learn.”

Hayes shook his head, smiling. “Don’t worry about it.” He said. “Just sit and rest up… and when you’re famous try to remember to tell your fans about how Chemistry was your favorite subject!”

He let out a loud, jubilant laugh. Raphael said nothing. He simply shouldered his bag and made his way to the back corner. He found the only empty seat- one filled by a small bespectacled boy that almost looked like he should still be in middle school.

“Mind if I sit here?”

“Oh, no…. not at all!” The boy said, as he moved his things. Raphael watched him set aside a large assortment of books- nearly all having to do with chemical related fields- and some highly specialized equipment. Raphael rather had the impression he was dealing with his polar opposite.

“Thanks buddy.” Raphael said. “I’ll try not to get in your way.”

The boy seemed like he was about to reply, but Hayes had already jumped straight into the lesson. Right off the bat Raphael felt completely lost. This was meant to be a highly specialized advanced course for people who intended to jump into a chemistry related field immediately after high school. Raphael, who had never even taken an entry level course, found himself thinking that the words coming out of Hayes’ mouth were completely unintelligible. He sat there, feeling very stupid indeed, as the boys around him took notes in diligent silence.

The bell rang while Hayes was still speaking. Without missing a beat he reminded them all of the required reading that they would be covering in class the following day.

“I couldn’t even catch the name of the book!” Raphael moaned to the boy. He laughed.

“It’s this one.” He said, showing him one of his giant textbooks. Raphael stared at it.

“I wasn’t even given one.” He said, a twinge of jealous in his voice. The boy looked at him.

“Really?” He said. “Well… the library should have textbooks in stock. If you stop and ask, you should be able to borrow one. At least until you get your own copy.”

Raphael nodded, his expression set, as he tried to gather his things. He had set out a pen and paper to try and take notes, but had been so completely lost that he had not been able to jot down a single thing.

“You can borrow my notes, if you like.”

Raphael shook his head.

“No… I wouldn’t want to hold you back.” He said. “Trying to help someone like me…”

The boy smiled.

“I’m on the fast track to the highest paid internship in the world.” He said. “I can afford to take the time to teach my field to others.”

“Better do it for someone who has an actual future in Chemistry.” Raphael said. The boy suddenly looked stern.

“Education is for everyone.” He said sharply. “Learning is never a bad thing.”

Raphael looked at him, and then nodded slowly.

“Yeah…. I don’t disagree.” He said. “But…”

Hayes stepped up to them and Raphael found himself falling silent. He placed his hand on the other boy's shoulder and began to rub it. The boy stiffened.

"Peter." Hayes said gently. "I have to speak with you. Alone."

The boy, Peter, looked suddenly apprehensive. Hayes smiled down at him.

"Wait for me in my office. You know the way."

Peter stood up. He looked even smaller than he had before. He began to gather his things, his head bowed. Raphael stared at him. He had clammed up rather quickly, once Hayes had joined their conversation.

"Raphael." Hayes said. "Is there something more you needed?"

Raphael glanced back at him.

"Yeah." He said. "I never received my textbooks. I can't do the required-"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that." Hayes said. "Honestly… just between us… you don't have to show up to this class ever again."

Raphael narrowed his eyes.

"Why?"

"The school wants you to focus on baseball." He said. "We know how hard it is for athletes to focus on school. If we're going to have a chance at building a world class high school level baseball team… we need you to put all of your efforts into that."

He shrugged his shoulders, and then turned away from him. Raphael stared at his back, as he walked back to his desk. Peter turned to him, a little concerned.

"Do you… not think you can go pro?"

“They say I can, and I will.” Raphael said grimly, as he shoved his things back into his bag. “But an injury, or bad luck could ruin everything. And what am I going to do then, huh?”

Peter nodded sympathetically.

“That’s admirable.” He said. “But you need to be in an entry level class. You’re not going to grasp this without an understanding of the basics.”

Hayes shot a look back at him and gestured with his finger. Peter sighed, and shook his head.

“I’ll see you later.” He said gloomily, as he got to his feet and shouldered the bag. He walked away dejected to the door. Raphael watched him go, and then stood up himself. He took a little bit of time gathering his things, and then walked to the door.

“Raphael?”

Raphael glanced backwards at Hayes.

“I don’t want to see you sitting next to Peter again.”

He returned to his paperwork. Raphael stared at him, and then turned to the door.

He felt extremely out of place in this school. Some of the best and the brightest in the world were here. And although it was true that he was a prodigy in his own field- baseball- that was in athletics. Not academics. He could have gone anywhere he wanted with his talents, and he chose… here.

It was too much. He thought grimly. Everyone had warned him that this would be difficult, and he knew they were right. But he hated the idea of not taking his education seriously. And besides… he had a little sister that needed to come here as well.

Before his next period, he found himself stopping by the library. He informed the librarian of his situation, and she procured him a copy

of his textbook.

"I don't understand why you weren't given one." She told him. "Most people are given books before they take their first class."

"Must have been a mistake." Raphael said. She smiled at him- much like the Class President girl she was a student, like him- and her hand trailed across his. She turned away from him, looking a little embarrassed. Raphael watched her carefully. She was probably well on her way to becoming some kind of super librarian. He wondered what her curriculum entailed. He was so bothered by it that he didn't even ask her for her name.

He was in such a bad mood that he didn't even look at his borrowed textbook until he sat down for his next class. He opened the book, found the pages he needed to read, and had to force himself to keep it open. None of the words meant anything to him: It might as well be in another language.

When the class started, he was only too glad to put the book away… only to once again find himself lost and confused in the world of classic literature. This time the lecture was in another language… a language he did not even know the name of. He sat in an awkward silence, trying to process what he would have to do to stay caught up in this class.

He tried to pick up a few key words and phrases, and elected to look them up online during his break period later that day. At the very least he was able to isolate the language (Mandarin) and the piece of literature they were supposed to be studying… Journey to the West, one of the Four Great Chinese pieces of literature. Raphael had to go back to the library to get that book as well. He was so overwhelmed that, once again, he felt the need to get some fresh air.

"Oh."

He stopped. He had stepped outside in the school's garden and found the Class President standing right where he had left her last time. Cigarette in hand.

"I didn't know you smoked." Raphael said.

"It's a bad habit." She told him, as he approached her. "Please don't tell anyone."

"Alright." He said, as he leaned up against the wall next to her. He watched her carefully. She looked agitated. He could make out little lines behind her glasses. "You're stressed out?"

"Yes." She said quietly. "It isn't a matter that concerns you, thankfully." She peered at him. "You don't look happy yourself."

He shook his head. "I don't think my classes are a good fit for me." He said. "I've already fallen behind."

"You did transfer in the middle of the semester-"

"That has nothing to do with it." He said. "Forget it. You wouldn't understand." He looked down, and noticed that she was wearing nylon stockings today. She had great legs.

They stood in silence for a while. They were completely alone.

"I don't understand…" She said slowly. "But I do care."

She carefully placed the cigarette into a little disposal case and pushed herself off the wall.

"You would be the only one. Mr. Hayes certainly doesn't."

She looked at him. "Hayes?" She said sharply. "What about him?"

He blinked at her. "I have a Chemistry class with him."

She stepped close to him, looking intense.

"Has he done anything to you?" She asked urgently. "What-"

“Hey, back off.” He said, pushing her away slightly. She looked affronted for a split second, before composing herself. She had gotten carried away.

“Sorry.” She said quickly. “but what happened? What has he done?”

“He treated me like an idiot.” Raphael said. “I mean, he’s not wrong, but I want to at least try-“

“He didn’t touch you, did he?”

He gave her an odd look. “Uh, no.” He said. “What’s the big deal?”

She grimaced, and glanced away. In her hysteria she had momentarily lost control of herself. If someone… anyone… spoke up about Hayes… she would be able to get him fired. She had jumped to conclusions without learning the whole story. She would have to do better.

“Never mind.” She said. “It doesn’t concern you-“

She tried to step away, but Raphael leaned forward and grabbed her wrist. She yelped as she was whirled around to face him.

“Let go of me!” She struggled a little, her glasses almost falling off of her nose. They looked at each other.

“It does concern me, I’m in his class..” He snapped. “Spill it. What’s going on with Hayes? He’s the one you’re worried about, isn’t he?”

Sarah glared at him. She looked rather like a condescending librarian. Raphael reached upward, and pushed her glasses back up her nose. She sniffed, not sure whether or not she thank him. He loosened his grip on her, and she lowered her wrist slowly. Her big brown eyes never leaving his.

“Well?” He asked. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

She considered him for a moment, and then let a curt nod.

“If you are his student, I suppose you ought to know.” She said. “Robert Hayes is a child predator who preys on young boys.”

Raphael gripped her shoulder tightly. She tried not to whimper in pain.

“Why is he not in prison?” He demanded.

“He has tons of connections in the field.” She said. “He uses them to set up highly paid internships for the boys he likes. If you get into that program you end up in the highest paid positions in the world- right out of high school.”

Raphael felt his heart sink. He remembered what Peter had told him, earlier that day: “I have an internship.”

Sarah pushed him off her, still rubbing her wrist. “This is all illegal, of course.” She said. “But he’s been skirting the law for years and I’ve been unable to get any of his students to testify against him. If they were to do so, they would risk their futures and careers. They have spent their entire lives to succeed in their field.”

“That’s no reason to allow yourself to be exploited.” Raphael snarled.

“I quite agree.” Sarah said coolly. “I doubt you need to be told this, but stay away from Hayes. I don’t see you as the sort that he can control, but take care of yourself regardless.”

“What about everyone else?” Raphael exploded. “Someone in that class is probably being raped right now!”

Sarah shook her head. She looked miserable.

“I’m doing everything I can, believe me.” She said bitterly. “Please… be patient. I’ll do everything I possibly can to put a stop to this.”

She turned around and hurriedly walked away from him. Raphael watched her go, his anger at Hayes giving way for concern for her. It was her responsibility to deal with Hayes. And by the looks of it she was no where close to doing so. Hayes was older, more well

connected, and worst of all only had to outlast Sarah's term as Class President. Surely every other President before her had allowed this to continue.

Things were darker than he had thought. He thought grimly, as he trudged home at the end of that day. He honestly found himself thinking more about Hayes than he was his own studies.

"How was your day?" Angelica asked, as he stepped through the door. His baby sister was in the process of beating out a rug bigger than she was.

"You don't need to do that." Raphael told her. "I'll take care of it."

"Nonsense." She said briskly. "You haven't even sat down yet." Angelica was eleven years old and a tad bit precocious. An incredibly bright child, she had been on the fast track to attending the Academy that Raphael was now attending. She had fallen behind in her studies quite a lot after their parents had died, but she was making an admirable recovery.

"I think you're doing too much." Raphael said, not for the first time. Angelica had recently begun to insist on cooking all of his meals herself. He was glad that she was doing her best to do her part, but considering their situation-

"You can never do too much!" She chirped. "Sit down, and I'll bring you a drink when I'm finished."

He made his way to the living room and sat down. He reached for the chemistry book, and had gotten about halfway through the required reading before Angelica came back in, carrying a tea tray in her hands.

"What's it about?" She asked curiously, as she set the kettle down and began to pour.

"I have no idea." Raphael said. She gave him an exasperated look as she set his cup in front of him and then settled down in the chair

opposite him. “Don’t you have your own schoolwork to worry about?”

“Finished it.” Angelica said brightly. He nodded, as he turned his head downward to the book. Angelica hesitated- it seemed that she had wanted to ask him something- but she sat in silence, sipping her tea as Raphael poured over the book.

When the reading was finished, he felt as if he knew even less than when he had begun. “You’ll have to read it again, then.” Angelica said. “Or get a tutor.”

“We can’t afford one, Angelica.”

She pouted, but did not argue.

“Well you have to figure out something.” She said. “Get an easier class, maybe-“

“There are no easier classes.” Raphael said grimly. “This is what they put me into. They want me to give up and focus on ball.”

“And what’s wrong with that?” She asked sharply. “You love it.”

“Sometimes love isn’t enough, Angelica.” He said, as he flipped back to the start of the book.

“I think you’re being a little too hard on yourself.” Angelica said crossly. “You already have a career lined up for you. I know you’re trying to cover all of your bases, but-“

“I will not leave anything up to chance.” He said. Angelica sighed, and sipped her tea.

When he finished the second reading of the chemistry book he moved on to the Chinese one. Angelica was intrigued by it.

“You can read Chinese?”

“No.” He said. “But I’m going to have to learn.” She made an apprehensive expression.

“This is never going to work.” She said. Raphael privately agreed with her.

He spent the entire evening trying to read Journey to the West. He looked up an English translation online and tried to, at the very least, learn the basic elements of the story. He felt his heart sink in his chest: Not only was the story in a different language, it was comprised of a number of different volumes. He had no idea what part of the story they were studying in class.

“There’s no shame in admitting you can’t do something, you know.” Angelica told him, as he closed the book with a snap.

He couldn’t bring himself to answer her. It had all become too much. They ate their dinner- Angelica having a one sided conversation with him all the while- and he went to bed. He found himself staring up at the ceiling all night, unable to fall asleep. His thoughts were not on his studies, but on Robert Hayes, and what he might be doing to Peter.

He had heard of boys being sexually abused before, everyone had. But the thought of it happening to someone he knew somehow made it all feel too real. Sarah the Class President probably went to bed thinking about this every night… on top of everything else she had to worry about. Raphael did not envy her.

In spite of his wayward thoughts, eventually he did drift off to sleep. He woke up the next morning, gathered his things, made breakfast for a sleepy looking Angelica, and then was off to his morning practice.

After he was finished, he came back home, got ready for school, and then set off. He felt himself feeling apprehensive as he made his way to Robert Hayes’ classroom.

Hayes looked up at him as he entered the room and he frowned.

“You came back.” He sounded unhappy.

“Yeah.” Raphael said.

Without another word Raphael took his things and moved next to Peter.

“Hey.” Raphael said quietly, as he sat down. Hayes was glaring at him from behind his desk.

“Uh, hello.” Peter said, taken aback. And then he smiled.

The lesson began in earnest. Hayes began talking incessantly. The lecture was just as unintelligible as it was before. Raphael gripped the pencil in his hand, his completely blank notes sitting in front of him. He was so intent on trying to process the lecture that he did not notice Peter casting concerned glances at him.

When the bell rang, his head was spinning wildly. Raphael began to gather his things and stood up. Hayes was already making his way over to them.

“Peter, to my office.” He said. “We need to talk about your internship.” Peter’s expression fell almost immediately.

Raphael glared up at Hayes.

“Can I help you?” Hayes asked.

Raphael had to bite back his rage. He couldn’t stand up to a teacher. Especially if it could potentially impact Peter’s career.

“Yeah.” Raphael said. “I need some help getting caught up. I can’t-“

“I don’t care.” Hayes said. Raphael felt his entire body tense up. “You don’t belong in my class and you have no reason to be here. I’ve tried being nice about this but I can’t have you wasting my time, and I certainly don’t want you distracting my other students.”

Raphael stood up and banged his hand against the table.

“You’re a teacher.” He snarled. “Try to teach me. “

Hayes laughed. “Teach you? You’re good for nothing but hitting balls.”

“You would know a lot about playing with balls, wouldn’t you?” Raphael snarled.

Hayes grabbed the cuff of his shirt. In one fluid move Raphael raised his hand and punched him across the jaw.

“Agh!”

Hayes fell backward onto the table. The students there hurriedly got out of the way, eyes wide, as Raphael clenched his fist and scowled.

“I didn’t give you permission to touch me.” Raphael said coldly. “I’m not like them.”

Hayes whimpered. The boys all sat, staring transfixed at the scene before them. They all knew that with the school’s security system that the faculty already knew what had just happened.

The door burst open. A security officer came into the room, gun raised, followed by the Principal and the Class President, Sarah Carnell. She gave him a considerate look as the officer advanced upon him, the gun pointed right at him. The Principal raced towards Hayes’ side.

“Robert!”

The man whimpered. He seemed positively stunned.

The man whirled on Raphael. “How could you do this?” He demanded, outraged. “He’s a teacher!”

Raphael answered: “He touched me.”

The principal’s lips tightened into a firm line. He did not respond. The boys in the room went dead quiet. It was in that moment that Raphael knew that the Principal had known all along… and had done nothing about it.

“Hayes has been raping his students for decades.” Sarah Carnell said, her eyes flickering to the Principal. “You and I have spoken about this before, Pauper.”

Hayes sneered at her through his bloody mouth:

“There isn’t a boy in this class who will confess to such a thing-“

“Have you forgotten, Hayes?” Sarah asked. “Raphael is one of your students.”

Hayes flinched. Raphael stared at Sarah. Suddenly it dawned on him just why Hayes was so anxious to get him out of the class. Any boy that was not under his control was a threat to his perversions.

“That’s right.” Raphael said. “I know guys who have gotten raped. If they won’t come forward… I will.” His eyes flashed with a dark intent. “I’m going to crush you, Hayes. You’re never going to work again-“

“Now wait a minute.” The Principal interrupted. “I certainly haven’t heard any of these boys come forward. If any of them had any concerns at all they would have to do is come to me.”

Sarah’s expression became rather fixed. Raphael was sure that people had come forward… but had been silenced or removed from the curriculum to protect Hayes and his connections. There was a dead silence.

“You see?” Hayes said. “These boys-“

Peter placed his hands on the table and stood up.

“I was raped.” He said quietly.

A smattering of chairs all around them followed suit.

“I was raped.

“I was raped.

“I was-“

“Stop it!” Hayes shouted, wildly looking around at all of the boys standing in unison against him. “S-stop it! I’ll-“

The Principal’s expression hardened. It was a dark, calculating look. It was one worn by a man who was preparing to cut his losses.

“You… will all testify to this in court?”

Peter nodded.

“Then that’s it then.” The Principal said heavily. He pointed to the security officer. “Remove Hayes from the premises.”

“Wait-“

The man moved over and began to grapple with the officer. He struggled wildly as he was dragged to his feet. Sarah stepped forward to meet him.

“It took almost my entire tenure as President…” She said. “But unlike my predecessors I have brought you to justice.”

“I did not march for gay rights to be arrested for my sexuality.” He sneered.

“You were taking advantage of your students through your position.” She said coldly. “I am no bigot. I am bisexual myself.”

He spit at her. She stood tall, unflinching, as his spit hit the lens of her glasses, and began to slowly trickle down.

“Bisexual.” He sneered. “Women are all the same.”

Sarah stood completely still as the man was led out of the room. The Principal stood there, looking at her.

“Well Sarah.” He said at last. “This will destroy the premier Chemistry program in the world, as well as this school’s reputation. I hope you’re satisfied.”

"I am." She said. She turned her head to Raphael. "A word, please sir? I'll need your testimony…"

Raphael nodded as he followed out of the room. She did not speak to him as they walked the halls. She stopped in front of her office door and opened it, stepped past her secretary, and entered her office.

He closed the door behind him as she stepped behind her desk. She clasped her arms behind her body as she stepped forward. He found himself glancing down her back and to her waist, before looking back at her head.

"Firstly." She said, as she turned to face him. "I need to thank you. Your actions have led me to secure, at the very least, Hayes' removal from this campus. Even if he is not convicted- which is very possible, considering the circumstances- we will not have to worry about future generations of chemistry grads being sexual assault victims. You did a very brave thing."

"I just hit him." Raphael said.

"Never sell yourself short." She said sharply. "You took action when no one else was willing or able to. What you did was good enough to encourage his victims to be brave, and speak out against him. And that, in turn, led me to be able to corner him."

She paused, and took in a deep breath.

"I would even go so far as to call you a hero." She said. Raphael stared at her. He had not been expecting this at all. He had been told, all of his life, to never get into fights and to respect his teachers. But… in his heart of hearts, he had known that it was the right thing to do.

"I see that you are conflicted." She said. "Would you have rather done nothing?"

Raphael's eyes flashed. "Never."

She nodded. “I thought so.” She said. “But you still have a deep seated reverence for the establishment… So much so that you doubt your own actions.”

Raphael said nothing. She looked at him, almost expressionlessly.

“My dream.” She said, placing her hand across her chest. “Is to become President of the United States. My goal… is to sweep away all of the corruption that people see all around them. I did everything in my power to stop Hayes, by my own power… but it was you who finally bested him.”

“You’re giving me too much credit-“ He tried to speak over her, but she continued:

“Hayes is a Millennial.” She said. “The last generation to see the Boomers at their peak. They grew up envious of their grandparents wealth and success, but could never have it for their themselves. They grew angry and bitter, and grew into warped adults, and then into a warped ruling class. They sought to exploit others throughout their entire lives, out of a misguided attempt to live the lifestyles that the boomers had. It is my dream to put an end to all of it.”

She paused. She straightened herself, and then reached for a cigarette. Raphael watched her as she lit it, and let out a puff of smoke. He could see the no smoking sign just behind her head.

“If I’m going to stop the others like Hayes… the generation that surpasses even the degeneracy of the Boomers… I’m going to have to play a little bit dirty.” She said. “You made me realize that. And I understand that you have concerns about your career…. About what you should study here.”

Raphael looked at her as she smoked. Her gaze was intense and focused.

“Become my right hand.” She said. “Be my eyes and ears and help me destroy those who need to be destroyed. You will be my agent- the first of many, I am sure- in eliminating the millennials and their

hedonistic ideology . Our generation is going to have a bright, shining future, and all it begins with here and us."

She held out her hand. Raphael stared at it, and without a moment's hesitation, took it.

"Welcome to my world." Sarah said.

Act 2

The Right Hand of the President was not a glamorous position. He still attended regular classes and was heavily involved in baseball. But rather than focusing on traditional education, his primary purpose was as a spy. A spy dedicated to uncovering the darkest secrets of the academy that never reached the president's desk.

"You're a charismatic person." Sarah noted. "Far more so than I… people meet you and think you're their friend. No one would ever come to me with their petty problems… but you…"

He realized very quickly that what she was saying was true. He had not realized it during his first few days here, but the school's alumni was racked with problems. Everyone was struggling to excel and live up to the school's lofty standards, and as a result many of them weren't sleeping well, or had poor relationships with their families who anxiously wanted to see them succeed. These were the sort of problems that the class president could not alleviate.

He realized very quickly that he had been wrong to assume that he would be looked down on for being on athletic achievement. The student body was so busy with their own problems that no one had time to look down on his lack of education at all.

Teachers, however, seemed to have quite a bit of contempt for him. Raphael could go anywhere and do anything he pleased, and there was nothing that the teachers could to do stop him. His athletic credentials were so great that he could not be expelled, so the most any were willing to do were make passive aggressive remarks about his lack of academic achievement. They were, he was sure, bitter

about what had happened to Hayes, and feared something similar might happen to them.

“They all abuse their positions in some way.” Sarah told him, when he mentioned this to her during his daily report. “Perhaps not to the same extent that he did… but a lot of them got into teaching in hopes of turning this into a Communist country. Now that is no longer possible, they are surrounded by students who do not respect them, and it makes them bitter and angry. You are not the only one who is being treated this way.”

She was quite right. Older teachers specialized in perhaps one subject while the vast majority of the student base had much more well rounded educations. It was not unusual for a poetry student to minor in mechanical engineering, or work as an electrician to pay his or her way through school. Millennials had always had an aversion to any sort of real physical labor that simply did not carry over to the following generations.

Although a Millennial may know more about Shakespeare or Poe, the average student would be familiar enough with them while still having real, practical skills outside of that knowledge.

Teachers took every opportunity to brag to their students about what life was like when they were young. About how they went to college on loans that they had never really paid off and how they had travelled the world before being forced to work. But to the average student, these stories fell flat. Travel had become even more inexpensive over the past forty years. Traveling to Japan to them was seen as a routine thing rather than an exotic vacation. And everyone knew that working through school to pay for everything was more than doable. The idea of going into debt to pay for an education was laughable.

The teachers were from the older generation… the generation that naively believed that the most important thing in life was to have fun while you were you young and worry about life’s problems when you

were old. How funny, then, that many of them did not seem to want to accept the fact that they had been old for quite a long time.

"How do you not like the Beatles?" Mrs. Hawkins barked at him, once. "They're the greatest band in history! They were huge!"

"Because the label made them huge." Raphael said, his voice bored. No one listened to real bands with real people anymore. And so, the religious reverence that some of the older generation had with figures like Michael Jackson and Taylor Swift seemed strange to the younger generations. No one listened to their songs anymore and found the petty drama they got into trite and boring.

"The Millennial generation did not aspire to be academics, scientists, or tradesmen." Sarah told him. "They worshipped celebrities, out of some misconception that, perhaps, someday too they can have wealth and influence without having to work for it…"

Sarah very rarely talked about herself. She seemed very disinterested in doing so, but as her Right Hand Raphael was beginning to pick up on ideals and values. Although she very heavily disliked the older generations, particularly the millennials, she took great pains in being kind to those of her own generation. He had thought that she had singled him out by pure circumstance, but the more time he spent around her he began to realize that she had a very intimate knowledge of the entire student body, and went to great pains to provide for them as much as she was able.

One day he returned for his daily report and found her secretary, Stella, sitting at her desk.

"The President can't be disturbed now." She said. She spoke kind of stiffly. Voices could be heard from behind the door to her office. It was supposed to be sound proof, but they were so loud that he could make out a muffed noise from behind the door.

"Sounds like she's being plenty disturbed." Raphael noted. Stella tried to hide her giggle behind her hand. When she lowered it again

she was stony faced.

The door opened.

“I can’t do it.” The boy was saying. “I’m barely keeping up with my studies as it is-“

“You need to work.” Sarah said. “You have to!”

“My parents will take care of everything.” The boy sneered. He turned to walk away. Raphael half wondered whether he was expected to stop him as he walked past them and into the hall.

Sarah stepped out from behind him, looking somewhat flustered. It wasn’t like her to raise her voice at all.

“You okay, Princess?” Raphael asked. Stella said up and immediately went to go fetch her some water.

“Huh? Oh… yes, I’m very well…” She said distractedly, shaking her head. She didn’t seem to register what he had called her. Stella came back, and handed her the glass of water. She took it, but did not drink from it. Instead she stared at the door absentmindedly.

“He’ll be fine.” Raphael said encouragingly. “You worry too much.”

She shook her head.

“He’s making a mistake-“

“He needs to make his own decisions.” Raphael said. “You can’t decide for him. Even if you do have his best interests at heart.”

“He needs this.” She insisted. “I have to make him understand that.”

Stella sat back at her desk and sat in silence. Raphael and Sarah stared at each other. Neither of them seemed willing to back down. Finally Sarah broke eye contact.

“I don’t have time for this.” She said. She turned around and went back into her office, and shut the door behind her.

“I’m surprised she keeps you around, with you second guessing her all the time.” Stella said, as she began to type at her keyboard.

“She needs to be reigned in a little.” Raphael told her, as the sound of her typing filled the air.

“She wants to change the world, you know? She can’t afford to have her subordinates not follow her every order.”

She glanced up at him. The clicking stopped.

“If you care about her at all, you have to understand that about her.” She said. “Her dreams are too big for that.”

She glanced back down and continued typing. Raphael watched her for a moment, before turning around to the door. He wanted to speak to the boy he had seen leave the office.

It took him a while to find the boy in question. He was sitting off by himself in the lunch room, munching on a sandwich. He looked upset.

“Hey.” Raphael said. “Is something the matter, buddy?”

The boy looked at him and scowled.

“Wanna talk about it?”

The boy shook his head.

“I saw your fight with the Class President.” Raphael said bluntly.

“Oh. That.” The boy looked at him. “What about it?”

“What was it about?”

The boy shook his head.

“She wants me to become a plumber.” He said, sounding disgusted. “To help pay my way through school.”

“They make plenty of money.”

“Yeah, but there’s no status in it.” The boy stressed. “I didn’t come here to become a plumber-“

“It’s a job like any other.”

“What do you know?”

“I know that the President is worried about you.”

He looked surprised for a moment, and then shook his head.

“She’s the president.” He said. “She doesn’t care about me… She just wants to further her own career-“

“That isn’t true.” Raphael said patiently.

The boy laughed. “Yeah right.” He said. “She just wants labor- doubtless she has some kind of kickback program in place-“

“You just don’t want to work?”

“I don’t want to work as a plumber.” The boy said firmly. “It’s beneath me.”

“Okay.” Raphael said. “What do you want to do then?”

“Become an influencer.”

There was dead silence.

“A plumber would be more respectable.” Raphael said flatly.

“My dad was a streamer. He made millions when he was young-“

“Yeah, and that money has long dried up.” Raphael said flatly. “Get a real job, you bum.”

“But-“

Raphael stood up.

“Grow up.” Raphael said. “Everyone has to work. You’ll never escape it.”

He turned and walked away. He was surprised to find Sarah waiting for him in the hallway outside of the lunchroom.

“Thanks.” She said quietly. “He needed that.”

She hesitated. She brushed her hair with her fingers. She seemed unwilling to ask, so Raphael thought it best to speak first.

“I’m sorry.” He said quietly. “You were right. I just… assumed he had a more reasonable career path. That’s all.”

She smiled at him weakly.

“It’s fine.” She said. Raphael rather had the impression that he had had hurt her feelings.

“I’ll buy you a drink to make it up to you.”

“N-no you don’t need-“

He took her by the arm and dragged her back into the lunchroom. A bunch of people looked up, surprised. Sarah usually took her meals in her office. It was unusual to see her out like this, among the rest of the student body.

“What do you like?”

“I- uh…” She flushed. “Do t-they have any chocolate…?”

He ordered a chocolate shake for both of them and she stood there, rather awkwardly, as people watched them. Raphael could feel the rift between Sarah and the others- her status and influence had made her an almost mythological figure among the students, and she didn’t know how to handle it.

“Thank you.” Sarah said quietly, as they sat down with their shakes. “You’re very kind…”

She took a sip, and seemed to enjoy it. Raphael watched her carefully. It dawned on him suddenly that in spite of the image she

liked to present- that she was an indomitable force that fought on behalf of the students- she was still an eighteen year old girl.

“Tell me, Sarah.” He said. “Why did you decide to become a politician?”

She stopped mid sip, and gently set the shake down.

“The millennial generation.” She said softly. “Spent their youth picketing for equal rights. They wanted the government to fix things. It somehow never crossed their minds that they themselves would someday control their own government. And that they themselves could do whatever they liked.”

Raphael watched her intently.

“There has always been inequality, there has always been tragedy, there has always been suffering. The Millennial generation fooled themselves into thinking that this was entirely a modern social construct… that it was the fault of their forebears, the boomers. They blamed them for having all of the wealth and power and not fixing these problems, but… now that they’re adults, and have been for a long time, they have somehow done even less.”

She stared down at her shake. She had not taken it since she had started speaking.

“I long to be different.” She said. “I want to destroy this cycle, completely and utterly. And to do that, I feel that we must stop those from our generation from avoiding real work and responsibility. That mindset must be crushed. Too many of us still contain that toxic millennial mindset… that the government should exist to take care of them.”

Her eyes flashed at him. “Do you feel the same way?”

He shook his head.

“I haven’t thought about it much.” He said. “I’m busy living my life.”

She looked at him, rather intently, and then nodded slowly. “Yes.” She said. “You are.”

She picked up the shake again and began to sip on it. She looked distant, and contemplative.

When she finished she set the shake down.

“Thank you for the drink.” She said, rather formally, as she got to her feet.

“No problem.” He said. “Is there anything else that’s bothering you?”

She hesitated.

“It isn’t a school matter…” She said. “Not directly. But I am concerned, nonetheless. But it does involve a student… I’m not sure whether or not there is anything we can do.”

“We can try.”

She looked startled for a second, and then smiled.

“That’s right.” She said warmly. “We can try to help her.”

She sat back down and leaned over. The shy, awkward girl had once again become the Class President.

“Her name is Lavender Lowell.” She said. “Have you heard of her?”

“The tennis girl?”

“Yes.” Sarah said. “She is currently the number one ranked female player in the entire world. She, like you, is almost certainly going to become pro and dominate the circuit after high school.”

“What’s the catch?”

Her head tilted downwards. Her glasses glinted in the bright light.

“She’s dying.”

Raphael felt himself tighten.

“It’s some kind of degenerative disease.” Sarah said quietly. Her knuckles had turned completely white. “But with modern treatments its very easily put in remission. However… she isn’t allowed to receive treatment. It would impact her performance, you see.”

“What do you mean, allowed?” Raphael demanded.

“Her coach and Mother have spent her entire lifetime preparing her to go pro.” Sarah said quietly. “So between them they have pressured her into foregoing life saving procedures in order to remain competitive.”

“But that’s terrible!”

Sarah nodded.

“You and I are of one mind in this matter.” Sarah said quietly. “She’s quite literally dying, but to her playing tennis is her entire world. To stop playing is a fate worse than death to her.”

Her jaw tightened.

“This cannot be allowed to continue.” She said. “But I am at my wit’s end on what to do about it.”

Raphael looked at her.

“Why don’t we go talk to her together?” He suggested. “If we had done that with the influencer kid we might have gotten somewhere faster. We could go to one of her matches and see who she’s around… see if we can get anyone else to convince her to stop.”

Sarah looked somewhat abashed.

“I would…. Like to do that.” She said cautiously. “But… I’ve spoken to her about this before, and I’m not welcome, so-“

“Let me talk to her, then.” Raphael said. “Do you know when she plays next?”

“I have her entire schedule memorized.” Sarah said. Raphael stared. She blushed. “I-it’s not so unusual. I used to play… you know…”

“Well you can take me the next time she plays.”

“That may be challenging.” Sarah warned him. “She travels a lot now and… well, with our schedules-“

“We’ll have to make it work.” Raphael said firmly. “If we’re going to help her.”

Sarah hesitated for a brief moment- Raphael knew by now how much she hated leaving the office unattended- and then nodded. “Yes, you’re right. You’re absolutely right.”

When he returned that evening exhausted, but refused to allow Angelica to cook for him again.

“You’ve been doing really well lately.” Angelica complained. “I should be the one cooking for you.”

“No, you’re younger than me, I should be taking care of you.”

She stuck her tongue out at him and huffed. The complaining stopped once the food was set in front of her and they began to eat.

“Are you still learning chinese?”

“I gave up.”

“Chemistry?”

“I got the teacher fired.”

“Good thing you have baseball to fall back on, or you would be ruined.”

Raphael thought of Sarah Carnell, and he smiled. “I found something that suits me better.”

They cleaned the dishes together (Angelica insisted on helping) and they read a little bit of their textbooks from school before bed.

…

Lavender coughed. A large spurge of blood shot out of her mouth and onto the court.

“Lowell!”

She bit back her tongue and swallowed as the man walked towards her. He reached for her hair, wrapped his fingers into it, and twisted her head. She cried out as he pulled her head to the side.

“What have I told you?” He said. “Never, ever spit blood on the court.”

Lavender nodded, shaking a little. She was feeling a little apprehensive and dizzy. Her Coach stared at her rather intently.

“We can’t have you getting sick during the tournament.” He said. “You have to play, and you have to win. You want to go pro… don’t you?”

Lavender bit back the blood in her mouth and nodded.

“Then get over it.” He said. “Take tomorrow off, get your treatment, and I expect you back here on Monday raring to go. I don’t want to hear any excuses from you, do you hear me?”

“Yes sir.” Lavender said quietly. Coach nodded at her once, and then turned and marched off the court. Lavender stood there, her racquet in her grip, feeling rather weak. She felt as if she might faint.

She had to force herself to move, back into the shed. She changed back into her school things, and then lay on the bench and closed her eyes.

“You’re not dead are you?” Coach’s voice came from outside the room.

“No…” She rasped, as she sat up.

She put on her shoes and staggered outside the room, where Coach was waiting for her. Her Mother was sitting outside, playing with her phone.

“How is she?” She asked, without looking up.

“She’ll need as much treatment as she can get before the tournament.” He said. “I don’t want her out of bed until it’s time to play.”

Her Mother nodded. She set the phone down and looked at her appraisingly. Lavender bent her head and refused to look her in the eye.

“Hopefully it will be enough to get her through the tournament.” She said. She stood up, and wrapped her arm around Lavender’s shoulders. Lavender flinched as her long nails dug into her skin.

“Say goodbye to Coach, Lavender.”

“Good-bye.” Lavender said tonelessly. Immediately she was spun around and led off the court.

Her Mother had parked nearby, in the parking space for disabled people. Lavender stepped inside the car and fell into the passenger seat. She was taking deep, heavy breaths. Her Mother gave her a disgusted look.

“Not in the car.” She said primly, as she shut the driver’s side door behind her. “It’s brand new.”

Lavender nodded and adjusted her seat so that she can lean back.

“I don’t have time to take you to and from practice.” Her Mother said. “Your father needs to pick up some of the slack around here. He does nothing but work work work but doesn’t have the money to show for it. What a failure. I hope you don’t turn out like him, Lavender-“

Lavender let out a brief moan of pain. Her Mother carried on as if she hadn't heard her.

"You need to become famous. You have to become successful. To take care of your poor Mother who's been spending all of her hard earned money on you all of these years."

Lavender closed her eyes. She had heard this spiel so many times over the years that it had become almost a kind of a lullaby for her.

"We'll have a big, mansion. Fully staffed with a domestic team that can handle everything I don't have time for… We'll eat home cooked meals every day, and stare out at the ocean surrounded by friends."

She smiled wistfully. Lavender had always wondered why her mother's old school friends never seemed to want to see her, as an adult. She talked about them a lot, but somehow… they never seemed to get together.

"It's a shame that that Sarah Carnell couldn't go the distance." Mother said. "Imagine. A lesbian couple dominating the world circuit… the media would have loved it. You would have been rich."

Lavender coughed. Her Mother cast an irritated glance at her.

"Not in the car!" She reminded her sternly. Lavender nodded. A giant wash of blood was soaking in her mouth. She was now incapable of speech.

She was not able to spit it out until she got back to her bathroom at home. Her parents had installed a specific sink for this purpose, and Lavender stood over and retched. Her Mother watched her from the doorway.

"The Nurse is waiting." She said. Again she was playing with her phone.

Her childhood room bedroom had been ripped apart in order to make room for a specialized hospital room. Her childhood plushie collection had been given away, and the colorful wallpaper had been

removed to give the room a stifling, lifeless feel to it. The nurse stood impassively by her bed… which have been converted into a remission chamber.

“I don’t want her coming out of that thing all day.” Her mother was saying, as Lavender undressed and crawled into the chamber. “She needs to win this tournament, if she’s going to win that sponsorship.”

“I understand.” The Nurse said dully. She was a new hire, and was already showing signs of wanting to duck out on them. She wouldn’t be the first.

Lavender took in a deep breath and tried to relax as the Nurse adjusted the knobs and dials on the chamber, and it slowly wrapped around her, tightly binding her entire body in its embrace.

“One full day of treatment.” The Nurse said. She sounded somewhat bitter. “Right.”

“I will be able to play, won’t I?” Lavender asked.

The Nurse looked about ready to answer, but upon noticing her Mother’s intense glare she fell silent.

“Well.” Her Mother said finally. “That certainly is enough mothering for one day. I trust her to your care.”

She turned and walked out of the room. Lavender coughed, and then tried to relax. The nurse looked down at her, anxiety written into her features.

“Dear, I don’t think a full day of treatment will be-“

“I’ll fight through it.” Lavender rasped. She tried to keep herself from breaking down into tears. “I have to win.”

The nurse stared down at her. Her expression had become stony.

“I’ve spent my whole life training to go pro…” Lavender rasped. “If I die before that happens… I… everything I’ve done…”

Her eyes were starting to feel a little bit wet. The nurse leaned in.

“Listen to me.” She said urgently. “When you turn eighteen you’ll have the legal ability to make your own decisions. Please! The day of your eighteenth birthday… you have to get real treatment!”

That would get in the way of practice. And tournaments. If she was to win…. She couldn’t take her eyes off of the prize no matter what happened. Even if it killed her, she would make it to the very top of the world of tennis.

…

Sarah Carnell, as Class President, had been living on campus. As she did not drive, she had to wait for Raphael to come pick her up. She stood smoking on the curb of the street as he pulled up in an old beater of a car that seemed to have been made in the Millennium 10’s.

“I’m sure you’re used to riding in limousines, being class president and all.” Raphael said. He got out of the car and opened the passenger side door for her. She huffed at him.

“The money for that is being used for more important things.” She said. She sat in the car without complaint and adjusted her bag, tightening her grip on it. It was not until Raphael closed the driver’s side door behind him that she realized that she was in a car alone with a boy. The thought made her feel somewhat anxious.

Lavender Lowell was playing in the state capital today. The tournament had been raging all day, but in between Sarah’s other duties and Raphael’s classes and baseball training they had struggled to find time to set aside to go to the tournament. In the end Sarah simply had to give Raphael permission to skip practice, and ask Stella to handle anything that came up while she was away.

“What do you want to listen to?” Raphael asked.

“What?”

“On the radio.”

“Nothing.” She said, sounding surprised. “I thought… we were going to talk.”

“The entire trip? About what?”

Her brow furrowed. She hadn’t considered this at all.

“Anything.” She said at last. “Like… um… is this your parent’s car?”

“It was. Before they died.” Raphael said. “It was sitting in a garage for twenty years. Dad thought it wasn’t fixable… but I took some classes and got it up and running. And it’s been my car ever since.”

Sarah nodded.

“How resourceful of you.” She said. “I hope there’s no chance of it breaking down.”

“It’s possible.” He admitted. “But I can handle it if it does.”

She liked that.

“Well we can’t afford to be late to the tournament.” She said, checking her watch. “We’re late enough as it is…”

“What’s the plan once we get there?”

Sarah closed her eyes and thought.

“Her parents and coach will try to stop us from speaking to her.” She said slowly. “So if we can isolate her from them…”

“How difficult is that going to be?”

“Her parents tend to keep away from her during playtime.” Sarah answered. “Their priority is managing her brand and sponsorship

deals… when they aren't snorting cocaine, at any rate. They may not even be there. If that's the case, then I can keep him occupied for five minutes or so."

"You want me to speak to her alone?"

"Yes." Sarah said quietly. "At least at first. We need to show her that people other than myself are concerned about her situation. She has to stop, regardless of what she or her parents wants. Playing herself to death is not acceptable."

She had gripped her bag so hard her knuckles had turned white.

"You're right." Raphael said. "But I think she'd like to see you too."

Sarah nodded, but her expression was stony.

"What happened?" Raphael asked.

"What?"

"You're even more torn up about this than last time."

"What makes you think that?"

"It's all over your face."

She sighed, and adjusted her glasses.

"We were friends." She said, her voice stiffly. "Once. And we would like to continue being friends. But her parents… they drove us apart."

Her voice had an unusual edge to it. She was holding back intense emotion.

"I abandoned her to pursue my own dream." She said. "It's my one regret in life. I can't help but think that if I had stayed… And been there for her… She might be in better health today.

She fell silent.

“You still care about her, right?” Raphael said quietly. “It’s never too late. We will save her. I promise you.”

Sarah smiled at him wistfully.

“I hope so.” She said. “Thank you.”

They found a parking spot in the city and paid. They walked the distance to the tennis center, Sarah trailing a couple of feet behind Raphael.

“There it is.” She said tonelessly.

It was positively packed with people.

“I had no idea tennis was so big.”

“It’s not, really.” She said. “But Lavender is the most promising up and coming pro player there is… she’s slated to go pro right out of high school and win.”

“How do they keep the fact she’s sick under wraps?”

“They don’t. Everyone knows, they just think she has it under control. She’s such a dominant player that even in her condition she wins nearly all of her matches. And those that she loses are always to people who are already pros, not people in the high school level.”

“She sounds like a prodigy.”

“She is.” Sarah said quietly. “It’s why… I have such reservations about all of this. She was born to play tennis. It’s what she loves, and yet… Isn’t living more important?”

Raphael placed his hand on her shoulder blade reassuringly. “It is.” He said.

She pulled away, a little uncomfortable at his touch, as they made their way up into the pavilion.

“Tickets?” The man at the door asked.

“We have to pay?” Raphael asked, outraged.

“I have them here.” Sarah said quickly, as she reached into her bag and pulled out a pair of tickets. The man chuckled.

“You dragged your boyfriend along, huh?” He teased them.

Before Sarah could answer Raphael responded first. “I wanted to come.” He said defensively. “A friend of ours is playing.”

“Must be a good player if she’s playing today.”

“She’s the best.” Sarah said quietly.

They exchanged tickets and stepped into the pavilion. It was packed with people. Reporters, photographers, college scouts…

“Damn.” Raphael whispered, as he watched one of the girls in tennis skirts move back and forth. “Damn.”

Sarah frowned at him. “No swearing please.” She admonished him. He looked at her carefully.

“What?”

“I’m wondering what you would look like in one of those skirts.”

Her face turned a beet red.

“I-I I haven’t played in years.” She huffed. “And besides, we’re here to work.”

They made their way to the blackboard in the back of the building and glanced at it. It was a massive tournament- some of the best players in the country had been playing all day. Lavender was scheduled to play in the next half hour.

“We got here just in time, then.” Sarah said, relieved. “But she’ll probably be preparing for the match now… I’m not sure we can-“

Raphael was already moving to the courts.

“Hey!” She said sharply. “Get back-“

He was already gone.

She scowled, and crossed her arms.

“Probably going to look at more skirts.” She huffed. She tried to push back her annoyance: They had been planning on splitting up anyway. She trusted him enough by now to know that he would do what he said he would do. At the very least… he would want to see what Lavender Lowell looked like in a skirt.

“Sarah Carnell.”

She flinched. She stood up ramrod straight. She felt a familiar chill run down her back.

“If you had any sense you would be out there playing with the others.” Coach Henderson said, as he stepped up behind her. He placed a familiar hand on her back, and she shuddered as he trailed it past her shoulder and to her waist.

“Coach.” Sarah said. “It’s been a long time.” His hand began to trail lower, to her backside, and she swatted it away. She turned to face him, trying to reassure herself that she was in complete control of the situation.

“It has.” Coach said. “Lavender has spent the past five years becoming the best tennis player in the world… while you play at being a politician.”

“I’m not playing.” Sarah said coldly. “I’ll spend the rest of my life serving my people.”

“Lavender has made more money at seventeen than you will make in your lifetime.” He breathed. He leaned in close to her… far too close for her liking. “Assuming you are an honest politician, that is.”

“You don’t have to assume anything.” Sarah said. “I am.”

She jammed her finger into his chest.

“Which is why I’m going to put a stop to this.” She said. “I’m going to shut this whole place down if I have-“

A hand clamped down on her shoulder.

“Is this lady bothering you, Coach?” The security officer asked.

Sarah’s eyes flashed at Henderson’s smirking face.

“No, I will not be satisfied with shutting this place down.” She said. “I’ll destroy the religion of sports worldwide.”

“Sports have been a cultural staple for thousands of years.” Henderson sneered. “It came before this country, and it will far outlast it. Champion athletes, and those who train them, are the envy of people worldwide. Even if you were to become President of the United States… you can’t stop it.”
He gestured to the guard. “Take her away.” He said.

“This is abhorrent!” Sarah cried, as the guard’s arm wrapped around her shoulder. “You’re killing her! Her life-“

“Is tennis.” Henderson said. “Better to die a champion than a nobody.”

Sarah tried to fight, but the guard was too much for her. She struggled vainly as she was dragged to the front door.

….

Lavender had no idea that anything had happened. She was feeling a little light headed after the first two matches, and needed a little bit of a breather. She made her way back to her own private room and stepped inside. She turned around to make sure the door was tightly shut behind her, and locked it.

"Hey.”

She screamed, turning back around to see a boy her own age sitting on her cot.

"You- you shouldn't be here!" She said. She raised her hand and pointed a long finger at the door. "You need to leave! Now!"

"Sarah Carnell sent me." He said. She stared at him. She lowered her hands to her side, feeling herself calm down.

"Sarah?" She repeated, her voice lowering. "She… is she here?"

"Yeah." Raphael said. "She's worried about you, you know."

Lavender sighed, shaking her head. Her long brown hair fell across her face.

"That girl." She said. "If she cared so much… why couldn't she come herself?"

"She wanted to." Raphael said quietly. "But she's distracting your coach right now. Besides… she's talked to you already, hasn't she?"

"Whenever she gets a chance." Lavender said dully. "It's not like how it was when we were kids… she's running the premier school in the country, and I'm on the verge of going pro." She coughed, raising a hand to her mouth to cover it. Raphael gave her a concerned look. Lavender knew what that look meant.

He knows.

"I know why you're here." She said. "You want me to stop playing."

"That's-"

"I'll tell you the same thing I told Sarah." She said. "This is my life. I don't care if I die. I can't imagine a life where I don't get to play tennis. You wouldn't understand-"

"I'm going to be a pro athlete myself." He said coldly. It was such a firm, harsh rebuttal that she was taken aback by it. "But I have

never allowed that to control my life, the way you have."

"You don't know anything about me." She said icily. She thought about turning back around to the door and crying for help. In her mind there was nothing more to discuss.

"I know what Sarah has told me." He said. "You know what she said to me? Her one regret in life is that she wasn't there for you when you needed her most."

She glared at him.

"I'm going to be a champion." She said. "I'm going to make history! You would try to take that from me?"

"Yes." Raphael said firmly. "It isn't worth it."

Lavender shook her head.

"You're just like Sarah." She snarled. "Trying to tell me how to live my life-"

He smiled at her.

"I see that as a compliment." He said. "She's an amazing woman."

Lavender felt her heart seize up in her chest. She bit her lip and nodded.

"She is…" She said quietly. "I… wish things could have been different. I always imagined she would go pro alongside me. We were doubles partners, you know. When she quit, I felt- that she didn't value me, as her friend."

"She does." Raphael said quietly. "She's the reason why I'm here."

Lavender felt her eyes getting a little wet .She rubbed at them slightly with her fingers. She seized up as Raphael stepped closer to her, and held out a tissue to her face. She said nothing as he dabbed at her eyes, tenderly. It dawned on her suddenly that she had never been this close to a boy, ever.

“You’re a playboy.” She said, half accusingly.

“No, I have a little sister at home.” He said gently. “I’ve been taking care of her like this since she was young.”

She sniffled, trying to stop herself from crying.

“She’s lucky… to have a brother like you.”

She blinked, trying to get her emotions under control.

“If anything were to happen to her it would destroy me.” Raphael said quietly. “I think… friends and family are more important than money and success.”

Lavender said nothing. He was still rubbing her face clean of tears.

“I wish… someone cared about me like that.” Lavender said quietly.

There was someone like that. Someone who had gone to great lengths to be there for her, no matter what. Someone who had made sacrifices. Someone who was here today. And her name was-

“Get away from her!”

A bag hit him in the back of the head. Lavender screamed, stepping back as Raphael looked up to face her Mother, who was brandishing her bag like a weapon, her eyes glinting like daggers.

“Lavender!” She screeched, her eyes bursting out of her skull. “Who is- who is this boy!”

“No one- no one, Ma!” Lavender cried, throwing herself in front of him. Her eyes eye wide and scared. She looked positively terrified. Her Mother’s eyes flashed.

“No one?” She crowed. “Then what is he doing here, then? Was he trying to hurt you? Rob you? Rape you?”

“I was just talking to her.” Raphael said calmly.

“Talking.” The Mother sneered. “Boys only have one thing on their mind. Well. I’ll have you know that my daughter is a lesbian, and proud of it. She would never fraternize with the likes of-“

“Ma, please.” Lavender begged. “He didn’t mean anything by it, I-“

“Security!” Ma shouted. “Security!”

Pounding footsteps came down the hall. Raphael turned to Lavender.

“Call them off.” He said coolly.

“I- I can’t.” She said. She raised her thumb to her mouth and bit down on it nervously. “This room… you’re not supposed to be in here…”

The security officer came through the door. Lavender’s Mother looked down at him triumphantly as the man stepped forward and grabbed his arm.

Raphael gave a look towards Lavender. “I’ll call you.” He said.

“What?” The Mom exploded. “How? Why? What do you want from my daughter, creep?”

Lavender said nothing. Her face was set, as Raphael was led out of the room.

When he was thrown from the building, he found Sarah Carnell sitting out front, smoking. Several passerby shot her dirty looks as they passed. He moved and sat behind her.

“You were right.” He said quietly, as he sat down beside her. “She’s a mess.”

He told her everything that had happened in the room.

“What now?”
She sighed, shaking her head.

“I haven’t decided.” She said gloomily. “She travels so much that it’s going to be difficult for us to track her down again… and with both of our schedules-“

“Well, I travel too.” Raphael said, surprised. “Have you checked to see if our schedules coincide or not?”

“The chances of that are slim.” Sarah told him. She pulled out her phone and checked the schedules.

“You’re right…” She said slowly. “You’ll both be in New York two weeks from now….” She glanced up at him. “If you’re willing to leave your team for a bit, in between games…”

“As long as you give the okay, I should be fine.” Raphael said. Sarah nodded.

“Very well.” She said. “Two weeks ago we will proceed… in New York City.”

She stood up.

“We should get back.” She said. “We have a lot of preparation to do before we show our faces around her again.”

“She asked about you a lot.” Raphael said. “Maybe next time… you should be the one to speak to her.”

Sarah looked at him.

“Yes.” She said at last. “Next time… we do so together.”

Raphael nodded. They made their way back to his car and she sat with perfect poise. You would hardly know her as someone who was just ejected from a sporting event.

“How was she?” She asked, as they set off. “Did she seem sickly to you, or…”

“Her mom is a bitch.” Raphael said bluntly. Sarah almost laughed, but she caught herself and tried to preserve her image by putting on

a stern face.

“Please don’t swear.”

“Whatever you say, Princess.”

“But I don’t disagree.” Sarah said quietly. “Mrs. Lowell is quite the handful.”

“She really wasn’t happy when she saw me.”

“Lavender’s never been allowed near boys.” Sarah said quietly. “An unwanted pregnancy would ruin her career.”

“Her mom told me she was a lesbian.”

“Yes.” Sarah said slowly. “She was pressured to be. We both were. It was a status symbol among millennials at one point… it has long since fallen out of fashion, but some people simply can’t let it go.”

She breathed deeply.

“Love…. Is more than just sexual.” She said. “Friends, family… those who work with you. You develop bonds of love between them all. Perverting a friendship into being sexual… it’s disgusting to me.”

“You seem to have a much more stable social life than she does.” Raphael noted.

She looked surprised for a moment.

“That’s sad.” She said.

They broke down into laughter.

“I think we’re doing the right thing.” Raphael said. “The people who control her have no regard for her well being at all… this has to stop.”

Sarah nodded.

“She turns eighteen years old very soon.” She said quietly. “Once she does, she’ll have the legal right to make her own decisions as an adult. At the very least, her Mother won’t have nearly as much control over her.”

“She wants this, though.” Raphael said quietly. “This isn’t a legal issue… this is what she wants.”

“I know.” Sarah said quietly. “It is our duty to make her feel differently.”

The car rode along in silence for quite some time.

“Raphael…” Sarah said. “You must understand something important. There is a possibility we might fail.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“It’s true.” Sarah said, her voice heavy. “I cannot afford to take so much time to help someone who cannot be helped. If this continues for much longer I fear that I must be forced to put my attention elsewhere. I don’t want to do it, but considering the nature of my work-“

“I understand.” Raphael said quietly. “We’re on a strict time limit.” His fingers gripped the wheel tightly.

“It’s the nature of my position.” Sarah said, her voice bitter. “I have to be there to support everyone. I can’t drop everything and be there for a single person…. Even If she is my closest friend.”

It was a hard thing to hear, but Raphael was glad to hear it. Even if they did fail- even if Lavender refused to get treatment- they had done everything they could possibly do to help her.

It was dark by the time they returned to the school. Raphael parked the car on the curb and Sarah stepped out.

“Thank you.” She said. “I had a lovely time.”

She went red.

“I’m sorry.” She said hurriedly. “That came out wrong.”

“No, it was right.” Raphael said. “I had fun too. I like talking to you.”

“You think so?” She asked. They looked at each other for quite a long while. At long last, she turned around, and looked up at the building.

“I have to be going.” She said quietly. “I’ll see you at work.”

Raphael watched her go as she climbed the stairs back to her residence. He found himself wondering what a real date with her would be like.

…

“You’ve met someone new, haven’t you?”

His sister saw through him the instant that he came back to the house.

“Not someone new.” He said. “Someone I’ve been around for a while.”

“Huh.” She said. “Usually you’re a lot quicker than this.”

“She’s a bit of an odd duck.”

“Huh.” She said again. “When will I get to meet her?”

“We’re not together”

“But you’re going to be.” She said. “I know you want to.”

He smiled at her. “Maybe it isn’t for the best.” He said. “We’re both graduating soon, and-“

“Don’t give me that.” She said, annoyed. He laughed at her. The rest of their dinner together was spent with her pestering him about the

new woman in his life, and by the time it was all over she was telling him she would start asking around about who she might be.

When he went to bed that night, though, he was thinking of Lavender and her situation. She didn't have the luxury of pursuing love or normal friendships. When she wasn't playing tennis… she was spending her time preparing for the next match. It was sad, and pathetic. Even the person who cared about her most in the world, Sarah Carnell, was kept at a distance. She was surrounded entirely by sycophants, whose entire lives revolved around her becoming a tennis star.

He found himself feeling thankful that his life wasn't like that.

He woke up in a cold sweat. He took an early morning shower, and then showed up to his morning practice. He returned home to find a sleepy looking Angelica preparing breakfast.

"You don't have to do that, you know."

"But I want to." She said, as she put eggs and bacon on his plate. "Can the new girl in your life cook?"

"No idea." Raphael said.

They went their separate ways when it was time to go back to school. Raphael attended to his typical duties as the President's Right Hand. Sarah seemed to be busier than she normally was. He did not see her at all whenever he returned to the office. She sat in her office with the door locked, working.

"She thinks I didn't do a good job handling things while she was away." Stella sniffed. "So she's a little bit behind."

"Really? What did you do?"

"Everything that came up." Stella said, sounding unhappy. "The thing about Sarah… she's so deeply invested in what's happening in the school that she's monitoring dozens of things at once. It simply isn't possible for me to just… do what she does."

“I’m sure you did your best.”

“Don’t try to flatter me.” She said bitterly. “I’m just a secretary…” She returned to her work. Raphael wasn’t sure what he should say to her. So he gave it his best shot.

“Well I think you’re a very good secretary.”

She gave him a look. “You’re such a flirt.” She complained. She glanced back down at her screen. “Do me a favor? Don’t break the President’s Heart.”

The door to the President’s office opened. Sarah stepped out. She seemed to be in a great hurry. Her hair looked somewhat disheveled and her glasses were sliding off of her nose.

“Did someone call for me?” She asked anxiously.

“No, go back to work.” Raphael said. He stepped towards her and adjusted her glasses for her, while smoothing out her hair in the same movement. Stella gave him a dark look.

Sarah seemed to flush. “I- I can handle that for myself, thank you.” She said stiffly.

“Is something going on?” Raphael asked, in a hushed tone.

“Oh, it’s just the Lavender situation…” She said. “I haven’t been sleeping well, as of late…”

Stella had returned to her typing. The tapping of her fingers seemed to echo throughout the room.

“Neither have I.” Raphael said quietly. “I…. I want to do something. I don’t want to wait until the end of the month.”

“What do you propose?”

“Do you know where she lives?”

Stella looked up at them, startled. Sarah nodded, her expression grim.

“But I’m not welcome there.” She said. “And you, too… “

“Only if we get caught.” Raphael said. He grinned. “We have to play dirty, remember?”

Sarah closed her eyes.

“Yes….” She said slowly. “This is something we have to do.” She raised her head. “Stella?”

“Yes?”

“I’m going out with Raphael.”

Stella gave her a surprised look.

“To Lavender Lowell’s house.” Sarah elaborated. She seemed to have not even processed what she had just said. “We’re going to confront her Mother directly… with all of the power I have.”

“Should I order a limo?”

“No need.” She said. She grabbed Raphael’s arm and tugged. “I have something better.”

For the second time in two days she was sitting beside him in the old car.

“Maybe you should add being your personal driver on my career credits.” Raphael said dryly.

“Yes, I think I should. You’re doing a wonderful job.” She said. “Oh, this is it.”

They rolled forward and came to a stop at a large home. It was practically a mansion, in the wealthiest district in town.

“She lives here?” Raphael said, aghast. The house was positively massive.

“Don’t be fooled.” Sarah said dryly. “The family is House Poor… all of their income goes into paying for this property. And most of that income comes from Lavender.”

Raphael gave her a startled look.

“Yes, she was scouted at a young age, and started making money through play early on.” Sarah said. “So her Mother stays at home and manages the finances. She hasn’t worked in about a decade.”

“And her father?”

She lit a cigarette.

“I can’t prove it.” She said. “But I think he might be her coach. By staying unmarried and pushing her to her limits inside and outside the home they have been able to successfully prevent any accusations of abuse.”

Raphael let out an aggravated sigh.

“I know.” Sarah said sympathetically, as she smoked. “You must think I’m insane-“

“No, I believe it.” Raphael said heavily. “I’ve met her Mom. And I knew instantly that that was the kind of thing that she would do.”

Sarah lowered the cigarette and considered him.

“Thank you.” She said softly. “For believing in me.”

They parked the car in the driveway to Lavender Lowell’s house. They got out and looked up at the massive house somewhat apprehensively.

“Should we knock?” Raphael asked. “Or-“

“Up here.”

They looked up. A woman they had never seen before was leaning out of the second story window, staring down at them. She leaned

back, and all of a sudden a small ladder descended from the room, and hung from the window.

Raphael and Sarah looked at each other.

“It’s a start.” Sarah said wryly, as she reached for the ladder and began to climb.

It was a removable ladder, Raphael feared that she might fall. It swayed slightly, back and forth, as Sarah climbed. She reached the top and turned around.

“What’s keeping you?”

He followed behind her and stepped into the room. It was a pure, white, lifeless environment. Sarah was standing facing the woman who had let them in.

She was a nurse, perhaps in her mid twenties, and very strikingly pretty.

“Call me Angie.” She said quietly. “You’re here for Lavender, aren’t you?”

“We are.” Sarah said cautiously. “Who are you?”

“I am Lavender’s private nurse.” She said. “My role is to ensure that she gets as much treatment as possible.”

“To keep her alive to play tennis you mean.”

Angie winced. She looked deeply pained.

“It’s true. I’m sorry.” “She said. “I don’t approve of all this at all. But it’s my job.”

“Why did you let us in here?”

She looked apprehensive and nervous. Raphael knew that she must be worried that the lady of the house would come bursting in here, demanding answers.

“I have told my employers several times that Lavender can not continue playing at a competitive level.” She said. “She requires near constant treatment If she hopes to keep her sickness in remission. It cannot be cured, but with modern treatments it is possible for her to live a relatively normal life if she takes certain steps.”

“But she has refused.”

Angie nodded.

“Yes.” She said quietly. “Her mother is entirely dependent on her income to live her lifestyle. The girl genuinely believes that it is her responsibility to pay for her own treatment.”

“What?” Sarah asked sharply. “She’s playing-“

Her hand trembled. The Nurse nodded.

“Yes.” She said quietly. “You wouldn’t know. Lavender’s income is the only thing keeping her alive. The instant that the money stops coming in… she can no longer afford her treatments.”

Sarah clenched her teeth. “Where is she?” She asked quietly. “I need to see her.”

“Follow me.”

The Nurse turned and made her way to a door behind them. Sarah was about to step off after her, until Raphael grabbed her arm.

“What?” She snapped, trying to wrench it out of his grip.

“You need to calm down.” He said. “You’re not thinking rationally. You’re not going to do Lavender any favors if you make a mistake now.”

Sarah’s first instinct was to say something nasty, but when she thought about it the more she realized he was right. He released her and she lowered her arm, taking a deep breath.

“Yes…” She said slowly. “I need to be in control of the situation.” She turned back around and marched to where the Nurse was waiting for them. Raphael followed behind. In spite of his words, he too felt angry. This should never been allowed to happen.

The Nurse led them down the hallway and to the neighboring room, further into the room. She opened the door and led them inside. Lavender was lying in her pod on her back, staring upward. She rather looked like the spitting image of a fairy tale princess. Beautiful, but somewhat ethereal.

“You-“

Lavender turned her head to face them. Her gaze met Sarah’s, and they stared at each other.

“You look well.” Lavender said, her voice stiff.

“And you don’t.” Sarah said bluntly. “You know why I’m here.”

Lavender turned her gaze upward.

“Yes…” She said quietly. “You’re trying to save me. From what? My own poor decisions? My parents? From what I love?” There was a bit of an edge to her voice. “I won’t give up tennis. I’d rather die.”

“Maybe you will.” Raphael said.

She turned to face him.

“Hello again.” She said wryly. “So you’re tag-teaming me now, are you? Do you want me to call for my Mother, so can we play doubles?”

“Lavender-“ Sarah began, but Lavender shook her head.

“This isn’t how I want to spend my time with you.” She said. “Can’t we… talk about happy things? For once…”

Sarah stared at her, rather forlornly, her lips tight. Raphael smiled.

“How about this?” He asked warmly, as he kneeled down towards her chamber, placing her hand on the glass. “My Sister’s grades are good enough that she can get into the Academy.”

Lavender blinked at him, looking rather surprised… and then she smiled. She raised her hand and pressed it against his. The only thing that separated them was the pane of glass.

“That’s good.” She said. “I’m happy for her. What’s her name?”

“Angelica. She’s twelve.”

“What is she going to study?” She pressed a little harder against the glass. It looked as if she was trying to touch him.

“We’re not sure yet. She’s really good at math but wants to keep her options open. I started studying Journey of the West a while back and she started reading it herself.”

Lavender nodded. Sarah stared at them, her lips tight. She could not remember the last time she had had a real conversation with Lavender that did not involve sports or her declining health. The realization almost made her cry.

“Angelica… I’d like to meet her.”

“We can bring her by next time.” Raphael said. “Sarah hasn’t met her yet either.”

Lavender smiled. “You’d bring her here? And see me like this?”

For the briefest of moments Raphael’s face fell. Lavender’s face tightened. She lowered her hand, and placed it back on her side.

“You don’t have to try and cheer me up, you know.” She said quietly. “I know what’s going to happen to me. I know how it all ends. And yet I don’t really care. I’m going to do everything I can for the world of tennis, and then… stop.”

She took in a deep breath of air.

“I’m an athlete.” She said. “I’ve spent my entire life building up to this. I can’t let my condition get in the way of my dream.”

“Is it… *your* dream?” Sarah asked.

“Mother and I want the same thing.” Lavender said, her voice testy.

“You know, Lavender…” Raphael said. “People tend to discover new loves and passions as they get older. Maybe someday tennis won’t mean so much to you.”

Lavender gave a dark chuckle.

“You clearly don’t know me very well.” She said dryly.

“But it’s true.” Sarah insisted. “You have your whole life ahead of you, it isn’t worth throwing it away for-“

“Tennis is my life.”

“That’s sad.” Raphael said, his voice harsh. Lavender looked up at him, surprised. “You’re telling us that you don’t have anything else in your life you care about? You’re going to throw it all away for tennis?”

“Ye-“

“What about Sarah?” Raphael demanded. “Do you not care about her at all?”

Lavender felt herself seize up. Sarah glared down at her.

“Well?” She demanded, an intense edge to her voice.

A forlorn expression crossed Lavender’s face. “You’ll always be my friend.” She said quietly. “But… tennis is the thing that made us friends, isn’t it?”

“Lavender-“ Sarah began.

“It should be more than that.” Raphael insisted. “You have to-“

The Nurse let out a panicked cry as the door burst open. Ms. Lowell barreled into the room, eyes blazing. Raphael whirled on her. He instinctively stepped in front of the President to protect her. Sarah stood her ground, eye eyes narrowed behind her glasses as Ms. Lowell came at them in a frenzy.

“You!” The woman snarled, her eyes bulging. She looked disheveled and wide-eyed. Raphael had never seen a more wild looking person.

“Hello Mrs. Lowell.” Sarah said disparagingly. “Still snorting the powder, I see.”

They must have interrupted her: Raphael could make out a tinge of white powder on her nose.

“What I do in my own home isn’t your business.” Mrs. Lowell sneered. “You aren’t welcome here.”

“Mother-“ Lavender began.

“Quiet!” She snapped at her. “Do you want to play or not?”

Lavender fell silent.

“She won’t get better as long as she’s prioritizing tennis over her health.” Sarah said coldly.

“She has to play.” Mrs. Lowell said. “She has to.”

Raphael felt a surge of anger run throughout his entire body. He was sure, then and there, that this was the real reason why she would not give up. It was nothing more than some misguided attempt at making her Mother happy.

“She has to stop.” Raphael said coldly. “We’ll make her stop.”

Mrs. Lowell glared at him.

“Is that a threat?” She said, her voice low and dangerous.

“Raphael…” Sarah said. Raphael ignored her. He stood his ground, staring intently at Mrs. Lowell. She stared back.

“You come into my home, and you threaten me.” She said quietly. “I will be pressing charges.”

Sarah cast a fearful look at Raphael. She was weighing their options in her head. But before she could come to a decision Raphael was already speaking.

“What will the cops say when we tell them why were here?” Raphael demanded. Sarah felt her heart leap in her chest. She nodded, regaining her composure.

“Yes…” She said slowly. “What will they say, I wonder… that the Academy Class President and her Right Hand thought to pay you a visit tonight…”

“You’re just kids.” Mrs. Lowell sneered. “When I was your age I was trying to decide whether to marry my high school sweetheart or run off with my tennis coach. I wasn’t prodding my nose into other people’s business.”

“We’re better than you.” Sarah said firmly. Mrs. Lowell hissed.

“Call the police.” She told the nurse, swaying. The nurse hesitated. “Now!”

“N-no.”

Mrs. Lowell stared. “What?”

“I want Lavender to be taken away from here. Far from here, where you can’t control her.” The Nurse said. “What you’re doing to her… it’s killing her. This isn’t why… this isn’t why I became a nurse.

Mrs. Lowell raised her hand and slapped her across the face. The woman reeled, her eyes wide in shock.

“How hard is it for you people to do what your jobs?” She demanded. “She’s my child. I’ve wanted this for her since before she was born. Everything I’ve done…. Everything I have sacrificed… is for her to be the best there is at tennis. If she can’t do that for me, she’s worthless.”

Lavender’s eyes welled up with tears. Raphael stared down at her..

“You don’t care about her at all, do you…?” He said quietly.

“Of course I do.” Mrs. Lowell said. “I had to, to make her into a star.”

“But what about what’s best for her?”

“She wants this.” Mrs. Lowell said. “Don’t you, Lavender?”

Lavender closed her eyes. The tears were still in her face as she nodded once.

“You see?” Her Mother asked condescendingly. “Who are you, to tell my daughter how she wants to spend her life? It’s better to burn out, than to fade away.”

“There’s more to life than simply being successful in sports.” Raphael said coldly.

“You’re just jealous.”

Raphael stared at her. He was so livid that he couldn’t even think of what to say. Her lips pursed.

“Someone like you will spend the rest of your life wishing he could be a pro athlete.” She said quietly. “A life of non stop pleasure and fun… a life of no cares or worries. Yes… someone like you will grow to envy that life.”

She stepped back.

“I am going to lock the door.” She said. “All three of you will be put under arrest. You, Nurse, will be fired. And rest assured that I will ensure that your replacement will do her job.”

She closed the door and locked it. Raphael whirled around, trying to isolate a possible method of escape.

“Don’t bother.” The Nurse said quietly. “This room was designed to be completely cut off from the rest of the house. You can’t get in here without a key.”

“Please tell me you have one.”

“I do not.”

Raphael groaned.

Sarah had ignored this exchange. She leaned in over Lavender’s chamber and looked down at her.

“Is this really what you want?” She asked. “For your friend to be arrested for trying to protect you?”

“This is my decision.” Lavender said flatly. “And you’re not respecting it.”
Sarah stared down at her with a neutral expression.

“Friends don’t let friends make bad decisions.”

Lavender laughed, and then caught herself.

“I mean it.” She said. “Leave me be… this is what I want.”

“Is it really?” Raphael asked. “Or is it what your Mother wants?” His eyes narrowed. “If you could do anything you wanted right now, what would you do?”

Lavender paused. She took in a deep breath.

“I think.” Raphael said coolly. “That you would want to spend more time with Sarah.”

Sarah turned towards him. Her normally stoic expression had twisted into one of pure shock. Lavender sat there. The tears that she had managed to hold back were once again falling down her face.

“You’re right…” She sobbed quietly. “You’re absolutely right.”

“Being a pro tennis player doesn’t mean that you have to sacrifice your friends.” Raphael said quietly. “You’re dying, and you’re dominating in your chosen field. You can afford to take some time off to recover.”

“But your Mother doesn’t want you to do that because she wants you to hit the pro circuit at eighteen.” Sarah said. “She thinks it will impact your marketability and income. And what’s more… once you become an adult… it will be more difficult for her to exploit you.”

Lavender trembled.

“If you die, you’re not going to have a successful career for yourself.” Raphael said. “You’re not being brave or noble. You’re just being stupid.”

“N-no… I…”

“You HAVE to stop and take a break.” Sarah said. “You can get better…”

Angie stepped forward.

“It’s true.” She said, in a rush. “These treatments… they’re improving all the time. The only issue you have is that your schedule isn’t allowing for frequent enough treatment. If you spend enough time, then-“

“Up here, officers!” Mrs. Lowell’s voice could be heard faintly through the door.

“If you love the sport-“ Raphael said.

“You must live!” Sarah said.
The door opened. Two officers came into the room, weapons held upright. They paused, blinking in the dark room.

“Come Raphael.” Sarah said quietly. “We’re leaving.”

…

“I can’t believe that they kicked us out.” Raphael said quietly, as he drove them Sarah nodded, her face grim.

“Her Mother has too much power over her.” She said. “But did you hear her towards the end? She’s starting to slip. We’re on the right track. If her Mother would just do the right thing, none of this would have had to happen.

“What’s our next move?”

“We expose them.” She said quietly. “I see no other method of recourse. We have to go public about this. The tennis world is allowing this girl to ruin her life for the game. Anyone outside that sphere will be outraged. That Nurse just ruined her career over this.”

Raphael hesitated.

“Is it possible… that I can help with that?”

Sarah gave him a considering look.

“Yes.” She said. “I suppose… if I were to contact the press… and you were to testify…”

“And if I could get my people involved…”

“They may not help us.” Sarah warned.

“I’ll convince them.” Raphael promised.

“Very well.” Sarah said. “I will leave that to you.” She looked around, frowning. “Where are we?”

Raphael had been driving with no real destination in mind. As such he had defaulted to his regular route.

“My place.” Raphael said.

“Awfully presumptuous of you.” Sarah said dryly. Raphael laughed.

“My sister should have dinner ready.” He said. “Would you like to join us?”

“I don’t think I have much of a choice.” She said, checking her watch. “But you will have to drive me back afterward, understand?”

Angelica wasn’t happy.

“You should have told me we were having a guest!” She said frantically. “I would have used the nice plates-“

“Calm down, it’s not that big of a deal.” Raphael told her. Sarah was sitting in the living room. She had asked to be left alone for a moment to check up on her work on her phone.

“It is a big deal! You brought your new girlfriend over and I wasn’t ready!”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Not yet.” Angelica sniffed, as she turned away from him. She tried adjusting her ponytail into a neater looking look. Raphael stepped forward and helped her do it. “Where did you meet her?” She asked him, as his fingers deftly moved through her hair, working with hers to get the look just right.

“School.”

“So what, she likes athletes or something?”

Raphael smiled as he tugged on her hair. “Not really.” If only she knew.

She turned around to face him, frowning. “So why you?”

“Why don’t you ask her yourself?”

“You know I think I will.” Angelica flounced into the other room. “Saaaaaarah.”

Raphael rolled his eyes and smiled, as he took over cooking Angelica's half cooked meal.

"It's ready." He said, about fifteen minutes later. Angelica was still pestering Sarah on the couch.

"I hope she wasn't bothering you." Raphael said.

"N-not at all." Sarah said. She was blushing a bright furious red. It seemed that Angelica hadn't been subtle in her questioning. "Thank you for cooking for me."

"It wasn't any trouble at all." Angelica said. "Let me know when you're coming next time, alright?" She flounced off into the kitchen.

Sarah and Raphael looked at each other.

"I guess she already wants to invite you back."

"I suppose." Sarah said quietly. "Do you… want me to come back?"

He smiled. He held out his hand to her and she took it. He pulled her to her feet.

"Of course I do." He said softly. They walked into the kitchen holding hands.

"Whatever happened to pretending not to be together?" Angelica complained. She was already sitting down at the table. Sarah and Raphael gave each other looks.

"We'll talk about it later." Raphael promised her. She nodded, her expression firm, as they parted ways and sat on opposite ends of the table.

They had a lovely time. Angelica talked incessantly of her school life, her grades, the boy that she had a crush on and the boy that had a crush on her, and about her future. Sarah sat in a polite silence throughout most of it, her hands folded in front of her. Angelica's experience was so far removed from her own that she had trouble

relating to it. It wasn't until the conversation turned to their education that she began to feel more involved in the conversation.

"You intend to join the academy, don't you?"

"You bet."

"Angelica's not much of an athlete, so we think she's going to have to get it on academic merit."

"I can do it." Angelica said. "But I'm kind of nervous. When my brother came home that first day I thought he was going to have a panic attack."

"You're right to be nervous." Sarah said. "It's not an easy program. But that's what gives it value." She cast a look at Raphael. "Anyone can succeed, if he or she works hard enough."

Talk soon turned to their families.

"The two of you live here alone?"

"Yes."

"Our parents left us some money." Raphael explained. Sarah frowned. Raphael had always been so reliable and hard working that it had never even crossed her mind that he had come from money.

"You're working through school. And your have your baseball career…"

"Yeah. I have to make sure the money lasts. Until Angelica is out of school."

Sarah felt her breath hitch her in her throat. A strange, floaty feeling began to well up in her chest. She stared at him, eyes wide. She felt a strange longing inside of her that she had never felt before. Angelica beamed at her.

"Do you want dessert, Sarah?"

She ended up staying far later than she intended. She had brought up the school brochure on her tablet for Angelica to peruse, and they spent about an hour after dinner looking through it together.

“We have the finest academics program in the world.” Sarah told her, as they flipped through the pages.

“Chemistry, biology, medicine… graduating from our school is practically a guarantee that you will go on to a successful career.”

“What are you studying, Sarah?”

“I? I want to be a politician.”

Angelica giggled.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m not sure you’re cut out for that. You’re too honest.”

Raphael laughed too. Even Sarah could see the humor in that… even though she did not laugh herself.

“Politicians are people too, you know.” She told them. “I would like… to be a different sort of politician. Someone.. who actually helps the nation prosper.”

She smiled to herself wistfully.

“I want to help people…”

Raphael sat up from his chair and placed his hand on her shoulder. She felt herself melt under his touch.

“You’re doing a very good job of that already.” He said warmly. “Angelica is going to have a way easier time at the Academy because you came by tonight.”

“You know very well that are people out there I haven’t been able to help.” She said, as she handed the brochure back to Angelica, who neatly placed it on her lap.

“We all do what we can.”

Sarah felt her eyes getting a little bit wet. She removed her glasses and rubbed at them.

“Are you alright?” Angelica asked, concerned. “Bro, you made her cry!”

“No… I’m fine.” Sarah said, trying to compose herself. “I’m just… happy. That’s all.”

She smiled at them. Raphael wiped away her tear with his thumb.

“I had a lovely time.” Sarah said, some time later as she was getting ready to leave.

“Let me know when you’re coming back.” Angelica said, not for the first time. “That goes for you too… okay?”

“Okay, okay.” Raphael said, laughing. “I have to drive her home. I want you in bed before I go.”

She yawned. “You don’t have to tell me twice.” She said. “I have school tomorrow.”

She bid them goodbye at the door and they walked down the driveway to the car. Raphael tuned up to look at the window of her room. The light flickered off.

“She’s a good girl.” Sarah said softly. She recalled how different she had been at that age, and found herself thankful that Angelica was far happier than she had been.

“Yeah. She is.” He said. “I guess it takes one to know one.”

She rolled her eyes, and then they both laughed.

“I’ve almost forgotten what it’s like to be that young.” Sarah said quietly, as they got into the car. “It feels like a lifetime ago, and yet…”

“I know what you mean.” Raphael said, as he started the car. “Did you know what you wanted to do at that age?”

“I did.” Sarah said, as they back off into the street. “But I didn’t have the same kind of support she did… my parents didn’t approve. Let yourself be a child, they said, and have fun while you can…”

Her voice had a bitter tone to it.

“It was why I kept playing tennis so long.” She said. “My dream career had to be put on hold so I can play a sport. I was good at it, and I enjoyed it, but…”

Her voice trailed off. The flickering lights of the nearby streetlamps cast strange shadows across her face.

“There are more important things.” Raphael said quietly. “Even back then, you understood that.”

“Yes.” Sarah said. “I did.”

They drove along for quite some time.

“Raphael…. Do you want to play baseball?”

“I do.” He said. “There’s no reason for me not to. But… I hate the idea of that being the only thing I can do.”

Sarah nodded sagely.

“If you could do anything, right here and now… what would you choose?”

He cast a glance at her. “I would choose to be as am I now. With you.”

She had never blushed so hard in her life.

They came to a stop outside the school.

“Thank you for tonight.” Sarah said, her voice a little stiff. “I had a lovely time.”

They looked at each other. Sarah felt her heart seize up in her chest. No… this wasn't right. No matter how she was feeling… she had to consider her position. She couldn't just fall in love with the first guy who came along. If she were to succeed as a real politician…. She would need to carefully consider her husband.

If she stayed any longer she felt like she might break in two. She turned and walked up to the building.

Raphael watched her go until she was out of sight, and then put the car into drive. It had been such a wonderful night. He was in an incredibly good mood when he got home and went straight to bed.

The next day, he returned to the office as usual. Stella greeted him from her desk.

"The President's been hard at work on the Lowell case." She told him. "Have you made any progress on that?"

"I've tried getting other students interested." Raphael said grimly. "But a lot of them don't think it's true, or that I'm exaggerating. They don't want to advocate for a cause they don't really believe in."

"Or they're just lazy and don't care." Stella said flippantly.

"I wouldn't say that." Raphael said. "But these people have their own lives to live… they can't just drop everything to save the life of a girl who they barely know."

"You did." She pointed out. "And Sarah."

He smiled at her. "It's our job." He said. "Without you holding down the fort the President wouldn't feel comfortable running all over the country with me."

"She's getting a little too comfortable if you ask me." Stella said. "She can't stop staring at you, you know?"

Before they could finish the conversation, the intercom rang.

“”Raphael. Come to my office.”

“Leave the door open.” Stella told him. Raphael rolled his eyes as he walked to the office door and pulled it open.

“Close the door.” Sarah said immediately as he entered. He could fell Stella’s judgmental eyes on him as the door shut behind him.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been asking around about Lavender Lowell.”

“And?”

Her lips twisted. “Both of us will be removed from any venue that is hosting her.”

Raphael groaned.

“We can’t see her at home, we can’t see her at play… when do we get to see her, huh?”

“I’ve been asking myself the same thing for five years.” Sarah said.

Raphael placed his hand on his chin, deep in thought.

“Well.. we’re banned from the tennis venue. But not the baseball field. Maybe we can get her to come to us.”

She stared at him.

“At the very least I can have an excuse to be there.” She said at last. “But why would she come to that event?”

“We’ll do what we did at the house. We play dirty.”

She gave him a considerate look, and then nodded once.

Stella was not thrilled at the prospect of handling the office alone for an entire weekend.

“I’m being left alone so you two can go off on your date-“

“It’s not a date.” Raphael denied. “I’m playing, she’s going to support the team.”

“Going to support you. You know, because she’s your girlfriend-“

Sarah came out from the office and Stella fell silent. She was very comfortable teasing Raphael, but not her superior.

“Ready to go?” She asked him, shouldering her bag.

Stella spluttered.

“You’re going now?” She had still not recovered from the trauma of trying to handle Sarah’s workload for a weekend.

“I’m having dinner with him and his sister tonight.” Sarah said, surprised. “I’ll be back before dark.”

“Yes, but with everything that’s happening…”

She was still fretting as they left her alone.

“She’s very dependable.” Sarah said. “But I worry I’m putting too much on her shoulders. I’m always on the lookout for new people to have around the office, but…”

“Maybe Lavender would be interested in doing that.” Raphael said. “After she gets better.”

“Mmmm.” Sarah said.

“People would start to think you’re collecting athletes.”

Sarah broke out into giggles.

People stopped and gave them knowing looks as they passed. Sarah noticed, and felt a little self-conscious. She worried briefly that it reflected badly on her: Doubtless to all of those around them they were a happy young couple.

“What is it?” He asked her. “Is something wrong?”

“No.” She said primly, glancing down at her bag. “Nothing.”

They reached his car and got inside. They had another lovely dinner with Angelica, and throughout the entire evening Sarah found herself surprised at how much she was smiling.

…

“You have everything well in hand, Stella?”

Stella nodded.

“Y-yes.” She said. In spite of the amount of preparation she had undergone, she still felt a little nervous. “Is a weekend trip really necessary?” She asked anxiously. “Personal flights are a luxury we shouldn’t pay for.”

Sarah cast a glance at Raphael, who was busy reading a text book. “My personal driver will be indisposed.” She said. “I don’t think I have much of a choice. Unless, of course, I ride with the baseball team.”

“Ah yes.” Stella said dryly. “That baseball team that Raphael is on.”

Sarah blushed.

“I can’t go with them.” She said. “It would make me look-“

“I know, I know.” Stella said soothingly. “You’re going to have to take the flight.”

“But-“

“Can you pay for it out of pocket?” Raphael asked. “A planet ticket is only fifty bucks.”

“I-“ Sarah shook her head. “No. I don’t give myself a salary. I’ll… have to go with Principal Pauper.” She seemed repulsed at the thought. “He’s a big fan of baseball.”

“Pauper?” Stella said, alarmed. “Sarah… are you sure about that? He’s-“

“Lavender comes first.” Raphael said firmly. Sarah nodded at him.

“Lavender first.” She agreed.

Sarah and Raphael parted ways in front of the school.

“Don’t get into any trouble.” Raphael warned her. “It’ll be a while before I can get there.”

“I won’t.” Sarah promised. “We’ll meet up in the city.”

She found herself grimacing as a limousine rolled up to them. The tinted windows rolled down and a familiar face leered out at them from inside.

“Hello Sarah!” Principal Pauper said brightly. “You needed a ride?”

His eyes fell on Raphael.

“I see why you’re taking the trip out.” He said smugly. “You two are becoming rather close, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” Raphael said. “She’s great.”

Pauper’s eyes betrayed his smile. They were narrow and calculating.

“Well, we better leave or we’ll miss our flight.” He said at last. “Say goodbye to your boyfriend, Sarah.”

Sarah turned to Raphael.

“Take care of yourself.” She said. And then she turned and opened the car door.

She sat down across from Pauper and adjusted her suitcase. They sat in silence as the car took off.

“I never thought I would see the day you would get a boyfriend.” Pauper said. “You told me you were gay.”

“He’s not my boyfriend.”

He smiled at her. “So you’re still at that stage, huh?”

She wished Raphael would punch him, but tried not to let it show on her face. Pauper was a sleazy person, but she had to remain professional.

“I don’t know what you intend to do at the Big Game.” Pauper said. “But I won’t let you ruin Raphael’s baseball career. At least while he’s still attending our school. So if you’re hoping to sabotage-“

“I want to be there for both of our school’s heroes.” She said stiffly.

He looked at her.

“Ahhhh.” He said. “Lavender.”

She stiffened.

“Lavender may be excused from all of her classes to play tennis… but she is still an alumni of this school. I will not tolerate your actions reflecting badly on her… or us. We’re going to New York, after all. The big city won’t have much respect for a little girl with delusions of grandeur.”

“I don’t have much respect for them.” She said. Pauper threw his head back and laughed.

“Do you think they care?” he sneered. “New York is the center of the world’s economy! There are people living there that have more power than even the President of the United States!”

She sat with a stony expression as he leaned forward towards her. She could smell his expensive, ritzy cologne on him. She wondered how many school lunches that scent could have bought.

“Even your grand dream falls short of reality.” Pauper said. “You think yourself a hero, a champion of the people. But you will find that the masses will not be so easily swayed from drink and

pleasure. You will learn… as we all have…. That the only thing that matters is acquiring wealth and power. To exploit others, so that you are not exploited yourself.”

“That philosophy died with the boomers.” Sarah said coldly.

“But it’s true.” Pauper said. “The masses are cattle that exist only to provide luxuries and services that we can enjoy. You cannot help these people.”

“You’re trying to sway me away from doing what I intend to do.” Sarah said. “It won’t work.” Pauper leaned back in his chair, and ran a hand through his hair.

“Three more months.” The man said. “Three months until you are out of my hair for good.”

Sarah closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She did not honor him with a real response. He was a nobody, in the grand scheme of things. She had to focus on the bigger picture.

The man stared at her as the car rolled along. They did not speak for the remainder of the drive. It was not a very long trip- the airport had not been far- until they came to a stop.

Lavender, her Mother, and her coach were all standing in front, waiting for them. Sarah felt her heart sink: Of course Lavender, who was independently wealthy, would be able to fly to her matches.

“Hello, Hello!” Pauper said jovially, as he got out of the car. Mrs. Lowell nodded at him. But her gaze hardened as she saw Sarah climb out of the car after him.

“You’re banned from the event.” She said immediately.

“No, no, Sarah is attending the baseball game.” Pauper said smoothly. He smiled at Lavender. “Her boyfriend is a baseball star."

Lavender stared sullenly at him. She did not return his smile.

“Oh, you like your athletes, do you?” Mrs. Lowell said disparagingly. “First my daughter, now this boy…”

“Ma…” Lavender murmured, casting an anxious look at Pauper, who had never lost his smile.

“Well anyway as long as you don’t come anywhere near our venue, I suppose there will be no problems.” Mrs. Lowell said. “Ah… you are aware that Sarah has been harassing my daughter, aren’t you?”

“Yes, we have just spoken about it. She is a very bad girl.”

Sarah narrowed her eyes at him. She glanced back at Lavender and met her eyes. She looked concerned.

“I hope that it will not be an issue in the future.” Mrs. Lowell said.

“Lavender… are you well?” Sarah asked.

“Do not speak to her.” Mrs. Lowell said shortly.

Lavender did not respond this. She looked embarrassed, and humiliated. To her surprise, however, Pauper intervened on her behalf.

“She will be able to play, won’t she?” he asked. He sounded worried, but Sarah knew him well enough to know that he was more concerned about how her health might impact the image of the school. As an actual person she may as well not even exist.

“Of course she will.” Mrs. Lowell said. “She always is.” She gave Lavender’s shoulder a squeeze.

“That isn’t what her nurse told me.” Sarah said coldly.

Before the woman could respond Pauper cut in.

“I suppose we better catch our plane.” He said. “Sarah? You have your things? Excellent.”

He pushed her shoulder and they walked past them and into the airport proper.

“You.” He said. “Need to learn to watch your mouth. The success of young athletes is a huge draw to the school. Lavender’s success has increased our budget several times over, and-“

“I mustn’t antagonize her.” Sarah said. “But what if she dies? What then?”

“It will be a tragedy that we can exploit.”

“You are shameless.”

“I’m honest.” He said.

She wondered if she would respect him more if he wasn’t so.

They boarded the plane and found their seats. Lavender and her Mother sat as far from the as possible. But her coach came over to speak to them.

“Principal Pauper.” He said, smiling grimly. “Always a pleasure.”

He glanced down at Sarah. “Hello, Sarah.” He said. His eyes ran down her face, to her neck, and to her chest.

“Hello, Coach.” Sarah said. She took her small handbag and pressed it against her chest, shirking away from him slightly. Pauper leaned over and placed his hand on her opposite arm rest. She felt as if he was trying to claim ownership of her. The thought made her shiver.

“How good are Lavender’s chances, do you think?” Pauper asked.

“Excellent.” Coach said. “As long as she keeps working for it, she has it in the bag.”

He walked away. Sarah lowered her bag. Pauper smiled at her as he straightened himself- his hand brushing in between her legs as he did.

…

It was a couple of days later that Sarah found herself sitting in the stands, looking down at the baseball stadium. She made sure to sit far away from Principal Pauper and his friends in the box seats, preferring instead to sit among the crowd.

She had looked through the pamphlet extensively. She had found Raphael's name on the player sheet, and was determined to support him as best as she was able.

She watched him carefully as he stepped up to the plate, took a swing at the ball, and missed.

"Strike!"

She checked her pamphlet and frowned. "A strike is good, right?" She asked out loud. More than one person gave her a shocked look. She tried not to look too embarrassed while on the second pitch, Raphael hit the ball and ran the bases.

She didn't know the rules or how the game worked, so she just sat in silence as the people around her sighed or applauded. She didn't understand the appeal of sports…. And at the moment she had nothing but contempt for them.

Is it really worth it… to be the best at a game made for children? She appreciated Raphael for who he was. A kind, loyal, committed man who was willing to fight for her for the good of other people. The fact that he was a such a star barely even crossed her mind.

The game ended. Odd, considering how they still had another turn at bat to go. Raphael's team had won. She thought. She stood up and checked her pamphlet. They wouldn't be playing again until tomorrow. She hadn't had the chance to speak with Raphael since she had arrived. She made her way downstairs and to the team's meeting rooms.

“No fans.” Security said at the door. She glowered up at him. She showed them her badge. As class president she had been granted permission to oversee the team. The guard hurriedly moved aside.

The team itself seemed jubilant. So they had won, after all. Raphael was laughing and joking with the others until he saw her. He made her way over to her quickly.

“What is it?” he asked quietly.

“I saw Lavender on the plane.” She said quietly. “If you’re going to do something, then do it now.”

He nodded, his expression set. Before he could answer her, a buxom blonde woman stepped into the room behind her.

"Wonderful game, Raphael." The woman said warmly, as she approached them. “Oh… is this your girlfriend?”

“She’s our class president.” Raphael said. “Madame, this is Courtney Chitwood. She’s a country singer.”

“A pleasure.” The woman beamed, as she took Sarah’s hand. “A fan of the game, are you?”

“Unfortunately no.” Sarah answered. “I’m here on business. It has been a learning experience for me, to be sure.”

Courtney giggled.

“I like that you’re so honest.” She said warmly. “It’s such a nice change… most people I meet tend to pretend to be huge fans.”

“Courtney became famous for singing the National Anthem during games.” Raphael said. “She was a patriot during that time it was hard to be one.”

“When the millennials started taking control…” Sarah said. Courtney nodded, her expression dark.

“It was a dark time.” She said. “It’s crazy to me to see how far we’ve come… and it’s all thanks to young people like you.”

“You’re not that old.” Raphael said.

Courtney giggled, and shook her head.

“Thank you, but I’m twenty-seven. I’m over the hill already. I didn’t get a real education or job like you, I’m just a singer.”

“Because you love to do it.” Raphael said. Courtney smiled at him.

“We all should take pride in what we do.” She said. A lot of the other players had cut their conversation short to turn and look at them.

“Excuse me, I need to congratulate the others.”

She stepped away to the rest of the team, smiling widely. Sarah watched her go, frowning.

“Sarah.”

She turned to look at him, frowning.

“I think she can help us.” He said. “If she’s willing to speak out about what’s happening to Lavender, there’s nothing the tennis community can do to suppress it. She’s big outside the world of baseball.”

“But would she do that though?” Sarah asked cautiously. Her mind was racing.

“I’ll convince her.” Raphael promised. “Leave it to me. But I’ll be on the field when it happens… it’ll be up to you to make sure that Lavender comes to the game.”

Sarah closed her eyes and thought.

“An official summons.” She breathed. “If I could convince Pauper to invite them here… to promote their own branding… they’ll be surrounded by fans when it happens.” Her eyes flashed.

“Leave it to me.” She breathed. “We’re going to crush them.”

…

Courtney Chitwood stepped out into the middle of the field. She stared up a the crowd and waved joyfully. Lavender sat sullenly as her Mother beamed at Principal Pauper.

"I hear the baseball team's chances at winning nationals has increased this year." She said warmly. Lavender wondered why she was so nice to him. Perhaps she thought that the school would continue to benefit them even after she graduated.

Pauper coughed.

"Yes." He said. "It's because of our new star player… Raphael."

Lavender gave a surprised start. Her Mother turned to face her. Her expression was calculating: She was trying to decide whether or not her health was up for this little venture.

"Is something the matter, dear?"

"No…. nothing.' She said. She leaned back in the chair. She felt troubled. Raphael… that was the name of the boy with Sarah. She turned her gaze downward to the field below, where a buxom blonde woman was stepping out onto the pitcher's mound.

"Oh, I know this girl." Pauper spoke up. "She's quite famous now, I hear…."

Courtney Chitwood stepped right into the middle of the diamond. She adjusted the microphone and smiled.

"Hello baseball fans." She said warmly. A bright cheer erupted from the crowd. Usually she would go straight into the National Anthem, but the singer was so popular among the audience that no one minded that she went a little off script.

"I've just spoken with the players on both teams, and their biggest supporters, and I found myself impressed at what wonderful young men they are." More cheers. "Many of them have hopes and dreams

beyond baseball. Some hope to go into business, to study law… I even spoke to a young girl who wishes to become President of the United States."

More cheers.

"But I'm told." The Singer continued. "I'm told that there is a girl here that does not have much of a future at all. This girl is dying, but those closest to her are using her for their own ends. For you, Lavender Lowell… I hope you live a happy and wonderful life!"

The stadium erupted into cheers. Her Mother stared. Her fingers clutched around Lavender's arm possessively.

"This girl is there, among the VIPS tonight!" Courtney said. "This one is for you, Lavender!"

Her Mother stood up as Courtney's voice began to reverberate throughout the room.

Oh say can you see

"Come on, Lavender, we're leaving." She grabbed hold of her arm.

Lavender gave her a startled look, and didn't move. Pauper gave them a shocked look. One of the men next to them glared at them. He shook his head. His meaning was clear: A disturbance to the National Anthem would not be tolerated.

"Go boil yourself." Mrs. Lowell said haughtily. "We burned American flags when I was in school. Come, Lavender."

Lavender sat, fearfully as more and more of those in the top box stopped to look at them.

And the Rockets red glare!

"What?" Mrs. Lowell snapped, glaring at all of them. "Do you know who we are? You're fortunate that my daughter wanted to come.

She’s famous, you know. She’ll be the best tennis player in the world next year-“

The bombs bursting through air!

The sound overwhelmed her voice so thoroughly that she had to stop speaking.

The land of the free!

The men in the box turned to look at them.

And the home… of the… brave!

Applause broke out among the crowd as, immediately, in unison, all of the men stood up.

“You’re the girl she shouted out.” The man said, before the applause had even died down. “What’s wrong with her?”

“That’s none of your business-“ Her Mother began.

“She’s dying.”

Mrs. Lowell whirled. Sarah Carnell was leaning against the wall just behind them, a cigarette in hand.

“Lavender Lowell has received a death sentence from her doctor.” Sarah said quietly. “But she has been forced to keep playing tennis regardless.”

The cameras that had been centered on the field had spun up to face them. Mrs. Lowell’s face could be seen, red and flushed, broadcast all throughout the stadium… and the world.

“Remove this girl!” She snapped, pointing a long finger at her. “She doesn’t belong!”

Pauper coughed.

“Um, actually. It was she who asked for you to be here.” He said, his voice a little awkward. Mrs. Lowell whirled on him, her eyes blazing.

“What?”

“It’s like this.” Sarah began. She placed the cigarette between her lips and lit it. She stepped forward, and let out a puff of smoke. “I’m not going to let you keep this a secret, Mrs. Lowell. After I’m through with you, the entire world is going to know what you are doing to your daughter. It’s going to be harder and harder to control what your doctors do when the public is demanding your daughter receive the treatment she needs.”

Mrs. Lowell stared at her. Her lips pursed.

“It’s all out of love for the sport.” She sneered. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, quitter.”

“I would not.” Sarah said. “Because I have always known that there are more important things. Love, and friendship, and-“

“Commie talk.” Mrs. Lowell sneered.

“That’s rich coming from someone that just bragged about destroying American flags in her youth.” One of the old men said darkly.

“I say, I say….” One of the man said. “Is what you’re saying true? Is this girl really…?”

“Yes.” Sarah said quietly. “If she does not receive treatment immediately, she will die.”

There was a heavy silence around the room. Lavender sniffed.

“I want to play.” She said. “I want… I want to be a winner!”

One of the men stepped forward and bent down to look at her.

“Winners.” He said, his voice kind. “Have to take care of themselves too.”

She looked at him. Tears began to well up in her eyes.

The man stood up.

“I want this girl taken to the nearby hospital stat!” He ordered .

“Who are you to demand my daughter be taken in!” Mrs. Lowell shouted. “She is my responsibility! Any doctor could tell you she’s fit as a fiddle!”

“Lady, I am a doctor.” The man said coldly. Mrs. Lowell fell silent, her jaw set. “I knew the girl seemed off the moment I saw her.” He said. “I assumed it was nothing serious, but if what the young lady say is true-“

“It is.”

“Then I have my own duty.” The man said heavily. “I will make sure she gets the treatment she needs, and if you really have been forcing her to risk her life to play ball I will make sure you end up in prison!”

Mrs. Lowell’s lip pursed.

“You wouldn’t dare.” She said quietly. “I’m her Mother. I have her best interests at heart. If she doesn’t play… she will never go pro.”

“Is that worth her dying for?” Sarah asked.

“Yes.” Mrs. Lowell said, so bluntly that everyone stared at her in shock. “Oh, you boys are into sports. Don’t tell me as if you’ve never seen someone walk off an injury, or do something he shouldn’t.”

“That’s different.”

“Because she’s a girl?” She asked sharply. “Her sacrifices and goals mean less because she’s a girl, is that what you’re saying?”

“I think everyone here knows you are deflecting from the real issue.” Sarah said.

Mrs. Lowell whirled on her, her eyes blazing. She stepped forward and got in her face.

“The adults are talking.” She sneered.

Sarah lowered the cigarette and blew a puff of smoke into her face. Mrs. Lowell reeled, taking a step, fanning herself to rid her of the smell.

“I am her Class President, and her friend.” Sarah said. “My opinion will be heard.” She turned to the man. “Doctor? Please take Lavender now.”

“Doctor…” Lavender said quietly. “I have a tennis tournament… Will I get to play?’

He smiled at her.

“We won’t know that until I get a look at you.” He said. “I can’t make you any promises. But you will not have any kind of career in tennis if you’re not well. I will do everything in my power for you.”

Lavender bit her lip, and nodded.

“I am in your hands… Doctor.”

“Wait just a minute.” Mrs. Lowell said sharply. “I’m her Mother. You can’t just take her-“

“He can.” Sarah said. “Do you know what today is, Mrs. Lowell?”

She gave Sarah a blank look.

“It is March 10th. Your daughter turned 18 today.”

All of the color faded from Mrs. Lowell’s face.

“She is no longer a minor, and is therefore not beholden to your wishes.” Sarah said. “She is free to make her own decisions now. If you cared about her at all… you would have known this.”

Mrs. Lowell tried to regain her composure.

“It slipped my mind.”

“Yes, cocaine has a way of making people forget what is really important.” Sarah said sardonically.

Mrs. Lowell raised her hand and slapped her across the face. Sarah stumbled, her glasses tumbling off of her nose. The woman stepped forward, as if she were going to hit her again, as the men surrounding them rushed forward to hold her back.

“You little slut!” Mrs. Lowell screamed at her. “I need her to play! You ruined me! You ruined everything!”

Sarah straightened herself and adjusted her glasses.

“I will not allow students to be exploited by anyone.” She said. “Especially not their parents.”

She turned around.

“Doctor. We should go now.”

The Doctor nodded. He wrapped his arm around Lavender and pulled her to her feet.

“Who is your regular doctor?” He asked. “What is your condition?”

“I… I don’t know…” She said faintly. Her hand was clasped tightly around Sarah’s for support. Sarah’s fingers curled around her own, as they leaned into each other.

…

Raphael did not hear about any of this until the game was over and done with. Courtney Chitwood came by to inform him that the Stadium ownership had gotten involved in the situation.

“Sarah’s with her now.” She said anxiously. “Uh, do you know where the hospital is?”

Raphael shook his head.

“I’ll take you then.” She said.

Some time later, he found himself sitting in the passenger seat of a famous country singer's car.

"It was my Dad's." She explained. "I'm not willing to get rid of it… I miss him a lot."

He hadn't even been thinking about the car. Now that he thought about it, it was rather old and beaten down for a celebrity.

"You're a lot like Sarah, you know." He said, as they took off down the street. "You didn't have to do anything, and yet… because of you…"

"Because of you I did what I could." Courtney said. "And because of me…. The doctor did what he could. And I hope… that it all works out."

She was worried. Raphael thought faintly. About the fate of a girl that she had never even met.

"She will be." He assured her. "We did everything we could."

Courtney nodded. She looked a little bit faint.

They pulled in front of the hospital and Raphael reached for the car door.

"I… I don't think I should go in." Courtney said anxiously. "I don't want to cause a scene… And the girl doesn't know me anyway."

"I'm sure she'll want to thank you personally when she gets better." Raphael said. She nodded, her expression grim, as he got out of the car and shut it behind him.

"Thank you!" He called, waving at her as he stepped up to the hospital.

In spite of what he had told Courtney he felt himself feeling a little anxious as he stepped up to the hospital. The idea of visiting a girl

with an illness was intimidating. He approached the front desk and asked after her.

“Ah… yes.” The receptionist said, checking her notes. “Your Class President sent a message down to me. She’s waiting for you…. Here.”

Raphael thanked her and made his way upstairs to the indicated room. He found Sarah standing by herself. She kept fingering the pocket where she usually kept her cigarettes hidden.

“No smoking.” Raphael said, to lighten the mood.

“I know.” She said. “You don’t have to remind me.” She looked more irritable than Raphael had ever seen her. Clearly she was beginning to suffer from withdrawal symptoms.

“How is she?’

She shook her head.

“They’re still conducting tests.” She said. She looked nervous and apprehensive. “Apparently no thorough examination of her has been conducted. So they actually have no real idea how far her disease has progressed. If it developed far enough… there isn’t much they can do.”

Raphael stepped forward. He wrapped his arms around her and held her in a tight hug. She pressed her head against his chest and began to cry.

“I hate this.” She said. She raised a fist and pounded it against his shoulder. He stood there and took it.

“Beating me up isn’t going to help her.” He said gently.

“What will, then?” She demanded. “I’ll do anything.”

He couldn’t answer her. In the end he simply held her as she broke down into tears.

“Miss Carnell?”

On a dime she composed herself. She straightened herself, wiped her eyes on his shirt, adjusted her glasses and then turned to face the door.

“Yes?”

The nurse standing there looked at them both.

“The initial examinations are complete.” She said stiffly. “Lavender will be fine-“

Sarah’s fingernails dug into Raphael’s arm.

“As long as she sticks to her treatment.” She said. “She wants to see you now. Both of you.”

She tilted her head, gesturing for them to follow her. Sarah held tightly onto Raphael’s arm as he led her down the hallway. He wrapped it around her waist reassuringly, and she allowed him to do it.

They stepped into the room where Lavender was lying on her back. She tilted her head towards them.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” Sarah said quietly. She released Raphael’s arm and stepped closer to her. “You look well.”

“It’s not like you to tell jokes.” Lavender said.

“I’m helping her with that.” Raphael said.

Lavender smiled.

“You’ve worked a miracle.” She said quietly. “She didn’t smile much… growing up.”

She coughed. Sarah took her hand and held it.

“You’ve become such an amazing person…” Lavender said. “And what am I? A failure.”

“That isn’t true.”

“I am.” Lavender said quietly. “I pushed away the best friend I ever had for my career. I thought I could do it… I knew I could do it. Allowing myself to do anything else would be a betrayal to everything I had been working towards…”

Tears were welling up in her eyes.

“I thought I was being brave. I thought people would look at my story and think I was a hero. Someone who overcame the odds to accomplish her dreams. I thought… what I was doing mattered.”

She gripped Sarah’s hand.

“But what really matters…” She said softly. “Is having someone who cares about me. A true friend.”

She looked at Raphael.

“You’ve been busy living your life.” She said. “You’ve found people that love and trust you. Meanwhile… I have nothing. In my entire life I only ever had one friend.”

“No.”

Raphael stepped forward and clutched her other hand.

“You have two.” He said.

Lavender stared at him, and then she smiled.

“Two.” She said. “Two friends.” She spoke as if she could hardly believe it.

“Lavender.” Sarah said quietly. “I promise you… I will do everything I possibly can for you. I will always be your friend.”

Lavender looked up at her. In one fluid movement she lunged forward and hugged them both.

“Thank you… thank you so much!”

Act 3

Over the next several weeks the school was embroiled in controversy. Lavender Lowell, the Star Tennis player, had declared an extended leave of absence from play in order to deal with her critical health concerns. The school, which had spent her entire four years enrolled in their program was suddenly hit with a wave of journalists demanding to know why no one had tried to help the girl overcome the issue.

The Coach hung himself in his garage. Her Mother died of an overdose. And suddenly Lavender was free.

“I’ve been taking her school things to her.” Sarah told him quietly, over lunch. “She’s getting antsy. She’s never been off her feet this long in her entire life.”

“That’s nothing to be proud of considering her condition.” Raphael said. “Does she still think she’s going to be able to go pro?”

“After about a year of treatment, yes.” Sarah said. “But she may not be in the best condition to dominate the scene, like she thought she would. She's worried that she’s going to lose her edge.”

“She’s young, she’ll bounce back.”

“I agree.” Sarah said quietly. “It was so easy. If she had just done it while she was younger-“

“It was the mother’s fault.”

“I know that.” Sarah said. “But this should never have happened. We need to introduce new athletics policies. Being a champion isn’t worth dying over.”

“We? You’re the politician here.”

“Oh, you know what I mean.” She huffed. “I’m not going to be in power forever.”

“Another month to go.” Stella said brightly. “And then you don’t have to pretend that you’re not a couple.”

They both looked at her.

“Oh come on.” Stella said, annoyed. “Everyone knows.”

“They’re work dinners, Stella.” Sarah said, exasperated.

Stella giggled. “Ah yes. You are ‘working’ on starting a family…”

Raphael laughed, but Sarah was unamused. Her eyes were on the papers in Stella’s hands.

“What do you have there?”

Stella held out the pamphlets she was holding.

“We are having our election for our next class president.” She said. “I thought you might consider endorsing a specific candidate.”

“She’ll vote on party lines like a real politician.” Raphael said.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Sarah snapped at him, looking cross. “I would never!” She held out her hand to Stella and she took them. She adjusted her glasses and looked them over.

“How do elections work here, exactly?” Raphael asked, casting a look back and forth between them. In spite of his close involvement with the President and her affairs, there was still a lot about the specifics of school’s political system that he didn’t understand.

“There are a number of offices.” Sarah said, as she flipped through the pamphlet. “Each individual year is allowed to have their own representative, who reports to the Class President, who oversees them all.”

“Sarah was president all four years she was here.” Stella said, with pride. “She won the position when she was still in middle school.”

“It’s why I’m so detested among the staff.” Sarah said. “They haven’t been able to control student’s lives like they used to…. Ah.”

She had come to the candidates for the following year.

“No seniors can run because they won’t be here next year.” Stella told him quietly. “So the oldest possible candidate is a Junior.”

“A junior wouldn’t have enough time to enact any real changes in a single year.”

“That is an astute observation. The system was set up to deliberately try and keep away any real responsibility from the constituents. As the population becomes more capable and competent, the establishment loses control of them. So they do everything in their power to keep the students under them as helpless as possible.”

Sarah’s eyes flickered over the pamphlet as she spoke.

“None of these candidates are suitable.” She said, a tinge of annoyance in her voice. “None have any real plan. They just want the position for the prestige to put on a resume.”

“You can’t blame them for that.” Raphael said. “You’re no different, right?”

Sarah glared at him, but he didn’t back down. “You’re going to become President of the United States.” he said. “This was just a way for you to get there.”

She considered him for a moment, and then gave a small nod.

“You’re not wrong.” She said quietly. “We are just students. Our long term goals should be our focus, and yet… I’m concerned about what’s going to happen here when I leave office. Look at this:”

She raised the pamphlet and began to read out loud:

"Richard Dickson. Call me Dick. It is my pledge to spend all of the money that President Carnell has squirreled away on one giant party."

She looked up at Stella.

"That money is a surplus left over from our budget this year." She said darkly. "It's meant for education. I will not allow it to be misused."

"If he gets into power there's nothing we can to do stop him." Stella said anxiously. "If we pass any policies protecting that money he'll just undo them. Uh, if he wins, obviously."

"How likely are his chances at winning the election?"

Stella placed a hand on her cheek and thought for a split second before she answered.

"He's pretty popular among his crowd.." She said. "People who are engaged with the system understand how competent you are… but considering you're leaving, people are anxious for some new blood. No offense, but you have a reputation for being rather stuffy and boring."

"S-stuffy?"

"She's not boring, that's for sure." Raphael said. "It's one thing after another when you're around her so much."

Sarah gave him a look, and Stella laughed again.

"Well, if you've had no one else for four years… and that someone has a reputation for being so strict… I think the younger students want someone who is more lax on rules."

"The rules exist for a purpose." Sarah said.

“But a layman doesn’t necessarily understand that.” Stella said gently. “Which is the issue. People have noticed that you have a budget surplus, and assume you’re just sitting on cash for no reason. When in actuality you’ve been budgeting your entire time in office to leave something of value for the next administration.”

“Those efforts will be wasted if Richard Dickson get’s his hands on it.” Sarah said stiffly. “Raphael.”

He looked up. “Yes?”

“Find this man and interrogate him.” She said. “I want to know what his plans are for his administration.”

He stood up and cracked his neck.

“Will do.” He said. He stepped to the door, opened it, and was gone.

It took him quite a while to find Richard Dickson. He did not seem to be taking any classes and none of the other juniors seemed to know him at all. He was considering checking the student directory online when he finally had a breakthrough.

“Surprised you haven’t had a run in with him yet.” Mat said casually as they stepped past the baseball field and into the street. “But I suppose getting involved with Sarah Carnell probably scared him off.”

“What do you mean?”

“The guy is a drug dealer.” Mat said, his voice grim. “He enrolled in campus to deal directly to kids from high income households.”

“That’s legal?”

“Of course not. But the school can’t prosecute him. It would make them look bad, after allowing him in.”

“Has The President had any run ins with him?” She had not mentioned it to him, but there was so much going on at the campus

that he was not expected to know everything about everyone. And at this stage, he felt he never would.

“A fair few. I don’t know the details… you would have to ask her.”

They came to a stop just outside the parking lot.

“I better go.” Mat said. “If I’m seen here there could be trouble.”

Mat bit his goodbyes and left. Raphael stepped forward and into the lot.

This field was being prepped for additional construction. Not a soul crossed his path as he stepped forward past the equipment and materials that would soon be used for the new building.

“Welcome.”

Raphael stopped. Sitting in the shade of a large tree was a boy about his own age. He was well dressed and mannered. He sat atop a blanket as Raphael approached.

“Never seen you around before.” Richard Dickson drawled, as Raphael approached him warily. “What are you buying?”

“You don’t seem to have any product.”

“It’s order only.” Richard said. “Ah… you do know what I do here, don’t you?”

“I’m not here for business.” Raphael said. “President Sarah Carnell sent me to speak with you. About your ambitions to become president.”

“Oh.” Richard said. “Her.” He shook his head and smiled. “She’s a looker, but kind of boring. No one likes her, you know.”

“She’s a great President.”

“So they say.” Richard said. His eyes sparkled. “She wasted her entire life, you know? Building up her cabinet. Finding and recruiting

the very best under her… and for what? For her to leave and all of her hard work to go unappreciated. It's a waste of life… y'know?"

"She isn't doing it for herself." Raphael said.

"Aw, that's the kind of goody two shoes shit that I hoped we could avoid." Richard complained. "See, that's the problem, you know? She's a seventeen year old girl-"

"Eighteen-"

"An eighteen year old girl who has spent her entire high school life shut up in her office, not making any friends, not networking, not having a real life plan. It's kind of sad, y'know?"

"She has a life plan." Raphael said coldly. "No one who has spoken to her would think she doesn't."

"Nah, man… what she has is a career plan, y'know? She thinks that if she gets her dream career everything else will be sunshine and rainbows. She has completely neglected everything else wrong with her life, y'know?"

He smirked.

"I hear that her old girlfriend almost died because of her, y'know."

Raphael narrowed his eyes.

"See, there's more to life than simply having a career, y'know." Richard continued. "My parents never worked, and my grandparent's never did either. It didn't seem fair to me… a third generation trust fund kid… to have to take 'my career' seriously in order to have a normal life."

"Everybody has to work."

Richard laughed.

"None of the boomers did, y'know." He sneered. "And plenty of millennials never did either. No, I want to live the way they did…

doing as little as possible for myself, or for other people. I just want to have fun, you know?"

"Then why are you running for President?"

"To achieve my goal." He said. "This place is too stuffy and boring, you know? I want to open a modern day Sodom… a club where the rich and powerful go to have a good time. Morning… Noon… and Night. A twenty four hour a day establishment where the fun never stops."

"And what exactly do you think is fun?"

"You tell me."

They stared at each other.

"I'll put my name out there by becoming President." He said. "I will use the momentum from my presidency to launch my business. All of the rich and powerful people that went to school here will long to come back… at exorbitant prices. And I can simply sit and enjoy myself."

Raphael looked at him.

"That's the dumbest idea I've ever heard." He said. He knew nothing of the clubbing business, but he knew that owning and maintaining a business- any kind of business- took an extraordinary amount of work.

"You have no vision. The students who will graduate here will spend their entire lives wishing they can come back. Why not let them?"

"I doubt that very much." Raphael said. "And I imagine The President will not stand for it."

"What she wants doesn't matter, you know." Richard said dreamily, as Raphael began to turn around. "The people will be the ones to decide. Will they get to have fun, and enjoy their lives? Or will they

work like dogs until they die? I think you'll find when that question is on the ballot… it will be very clear what people choose."

…

"So that's his game." Sarah said.

"It explains why he doesn't take any classes." Raphael noted. "His career plan is to open a twenty four hour a day nightclub."

"How viable would that be, do you think?'

"It's an industry like any other." Raphael said. "But there's a reason they are not usually open at all hours. People have to work, you know." He cursed himself. After speaking to Dickson so long, Even he was doing it.

"I am concerned though, about how he is trying to target our students." Sarah said. "I cannot allow this to stand."

"Can we remove him from the ballot?"

"No, that would be an overreach of our power." Stella said. "We could probably do it if we forced the issue, but…. Well, the long term consequences would be disastrous. People would keep fighting to keep rival candidates from running as opposed to actually running the school.'

"It's a tricky situation to be sure." Sarah admitted. "Oh, I wish I could stay on for another year-"

"You would just be delaying the inevitable." Stella said sharply. "A transition of power is difficult for any leader."

"To me it seems like the best thing to do would be to simply back another candidate." Raphael said.

"Yes, but who?"

"Is there really no one you have in mind?"

Sarah shook her head.

“No.” She said bitterly. “I’ve been so busy with my other duties I never really found someone I would be happy with as my successor.”

“Well, why don’t we invite the candidates forward for a debate?” Raphael said. “You have the chance to pick out your favorite, and the school will get to see Dickson fumble on stage.”

Sarah frowned, thinking deeply.

“Look.” Raphael said. “I saw through Dickson’s nonsense immediately. The kind of people who go to school here don’t want to party all the time. They want to study hard, so they can work and help improve society. These people aren’t going to be swayed by him.”

“But we mustn’t leave this to chance.” Sarah said. “We will have our debate, and then I will make my thoughts public.”

Stella and Raphael left her alone at her desk, furiously filling out paperwork.

“She’s wound up.” Raphael observed. He wondered whether he should get her some of her favorite tea.

“She’s nervous.” Stella said. “You would be too… if the transition doesn’t go smoothly it may reflect badly on her later in life. Imagine if she loses the American Presidential election because of this. It’ll be humiliating.”

The next several days went by in a blur. Sarah applied for use of the auditorium for the debate, and got it. Unfortunately, she was not able to mandate that people show up.

“Oh, is anyone going to show up for it?” She said fretting. “They’ll have to miss class-“

“They’ll be excused.”

“They have to fall behind-“

“Missing one day won’t kill anyone.”

“Nobody’s going to take time of their day to come to the debate.”

“Everyone invested in the system will.” Raphael said patiently. She looked at him. “We can’t force people to vote, but that also means that the people who don’t care about the future won’t take the time to.”

“Those are the kind of people that Dickson will appeal to.” She argued.

“I think you’re overthinking this.”

“I don’t think you know what you’re talking about.” Sarah said hotly.

They looked at each other. Their faces had become rather close during the argument.

“If I’m right you have to go out with me.” Raphael said.

“And what if I’m right?”

“You get to give me a kiss.”

Sarah rolled her eyes, and then smiled. Stella glanced at them from across the room. This kind of thing had been happening more and more lately.

“I don’t see why you don’t just start dating now.” Stella said. “Why wait?”

“It doesn’t feel right.” Sarah said. She glanced at him, pulling away from him somewhat. “For either of us.”

Raphael nodded.

“I have my sister and career to worry about.” He said. “We need to take this seriously. It can wait until we’re out of school.”

“That’s all fine and good, but you need to have fun too.” Stella said.

They looked at each other.

“I’m having fun.” Sarah said quietly.

“Me too.” Raphael said.

Stella looked at them both, and knew then that someday the two would be married.

Raphael and Sarah did not seem to process just what had happened. Instead they discussed at length the subjects of the debate. Matters of policy, of the candidates thoughts on previous administrations, and long term goals.

“We need impartial judges.” Raphael said.

“I’m impartial.” Sarah said. Raphael laughed.

“You’re the least impartial person I’ve ever met.”

She frowned at him.

“I can’t just separate myself from my own political bias.” She said. “People will think I’m being dishonest. Besides... seniors are more impartial than anyone else in the student body. When we graduate, we will gain or lose nothing from policy changes.”

“We just had a conversation about how your career might by impacted by this election.”

He knew her well enough by now that he could tell she was flustered, although not a shred of it appeared on her face.

“Well, no one is really free of bias, are they? We all have our ideals and our philosophies-“

“If you go up there and go after Dickson people will assume that something is up.” He said. “You can’t make your political bias known.’

“And they should think that.” She argued. “They’ll figure out the problem.”

“What if they come to the wrong conclusion?”

“I have more faith in them than that.”

They looked at each other.

“I think we both should be judges.” Raphael said.

“People may pay more attention to us than the actual debate.” Sarah said.

Stella looked up at them, and rolled her eyes.

“They will if you start making out on stage…” She murmured.

“We’ll need a third judge.”

“Someone… who knows the system.”

“Someone who’s willing to argue…”

“And make her opinion known…”

Stella was busy typing at her computer. A wad of paper slammed her in the head.

“You’re up, Stella!”

She scowled, and the two of them broke down into laughter.

“I better be invited to the wedding…” She said darkly, as she began to draft the announcement poster.

Later that day, She and Raphael walked the halls of the school, placing the posters on the walls.

“You kids should be worried about yourselves, not the school.” Old Mrs. Finney complained. “What about your own futures?”

“What about the younger students?” Raphael asked bluntly. “We’re not going to let this school regress to how it was under the boomers.”

She frowned at him, but he believed every word. A true hallmark of a successful adult was being able to provide for other people.

The day of the debate came and Raphael found himself sitting behind the Judge’s desk. Sarah sat on his left, and Stella sat on her other side. The debate had proven itself to be far more popular than any of them had anticipated. So many auditorium seats had been filled that it seemed like most of the school had turned up.

Sarah didn’t express her surprise to him. She would not do so publicly. Instead she simply checked her notes as the candidates took their positions.

There were five of them. Richard Dickson, a junior Japanese-American girl named Anzu, a Sophomore named Julianna Lansbury, a bookish looking sophomore boy named Atticus Fletcher, and a freshman student named Loretta Long, who was so tiny that she looked very out of place.

Sarah’s eyes flitted between them. Raphael knew that Sarah had not approved of any of the class president candidates, and he could see why. Nearly all of them had very little experience or knowledge of government. Either due to their age, or because they had focused their studies in different fields.

"My fellow students.” Sarah began. “Today we would like to take the opportunity to introduce you all to the candidates for the next class President. Thank you all for taking an interest in involving yourself in this school’s unique political system. Because of your willingness to contribute, this school has become increasingly liberated in its activities from our teachers, our government, and the greatest tyrants of all… our parents.”

The auditorium burst out laughing. It was too good of a joke for Sarah Carnell. She had never told one in her entire career. Raphael had come up with it while planning the event.

Sarah sat stony faced as she continue speaking, without waiting for the laughter to die down.

"As such, it is of the utmost importance that you consider your choice of president very carefully." She said. "Although I will have graduated by next year, I do not wish to see the efforts of my administration be squandered by an incompetent successor."

Raphael noticed the crowd shift about. He could read the room instantly: Sarah was making her feelings about the candidates too obvious.

"Now." She said. "To begin with… we will begin with a brief introduction of the candidates and an overview of his or her planned agenda for this school."

They began with little Loretta Long.

"Hello." Loretta said brightly, teetering back and forth on her heels. She had found a box to stand on and still looked much younger than she really was. "My name is Loretta Long. I am a freshman attending this prestigious institution. I'm very nervous, to tell you the truth… I have no background in political studies at all. But what I do have is a drive and a passion to learn."

Sarah sat stony faced. Raphael felt the same way. The girl was talking about herself more than her potential plans. She spoke well, and seemed nice enough, but she seemed to view the debate as a means of putting herself out there… perhaps, as a means of being considered for another position, or even simply for attention.

"My first year at this institution has been a delight. I have heard stories of how the legendary Sarah Carnell won her first presidency here while she was in middle school. An impressive feat. So

impressive that I could never hope to match it! Regardless, however, I do hope that you will consider voting for me."

She smiled and stepped down. Other than a few younger boys who seemed to find her adorable, there didn't seem to be a lot of enthusiasm for her speech. Sarah gestured for the next candidate to step up.

"M-my name is Atticus Fletcher.' The boy stammered. "I'm… Uh, I'm the son of a politician… M-m-m-'

He couldn't even get the name out. Raphael wasn't sure whether his politician parent was even his Mother or Father.

"I'm… I want to make my folks happy." He said. "So I…. So I want to be a politician…"

He stammered through his entire speech. He seemed to have a much more thorough knowledge of the system than most people- even referring to decisions made by administrators that the average student had never even heard of- in the end his inability to make his ideas heard made him even less popular than Loretta.

"Honestly I think he just needs to work on his speeches." Sarah murmured to the other two judges quietly. "I could see him excelling… Once he's more comfortable speaking in public."

Before she had finished speaking the next candidate took to the podium.

"Hi ya'll." Julianna Lansbury said. "I have a bit of a bone to pick with all of you."
And the girl launched into a rather convoluted explanation about how the school's faculties were somehow significantly contributing to global freezing and leading to a sixth mass extinction of all life on the planet.

"Y'see it's all well and good to be excited about the future… but ya'll ain't going to have any jobs if you're freezing under ten feet of

snow!”

“Thank you, Julianna.” Sarah said. “That was very enlightening.” Climate change had been proven as a hoax ten years before, and now the only people who believed in it were considered conspiracy theorists.

Raphael was beginning to feel a sense of despair as Richard Dickson swaggered up to the podium.

“Call me Dick.” He said smoothly.

“DICK!”

“DICK!”

“SUCK HIS DICK!”

The shouts came from the crowd somewhere. Raphael turned his head, but was quickly stopped by Sarah’s outstretched hand.

“Let security deal with it.” She mouthed.

“Yeah yeah, the ladies can get in line to do that after I’ve said my piece.” Dick said casually. “You guys can suck each other off for all I care.”

“Please refrain from vulgarity while at the podium.” Sarah said, trying to keep her tone neutral. Raphael glowered at the stage, his arms crossed. Only Stella was able to keep on an air of normalcy.

“I’ll save it for our dinner together tonight, you slut.” Dick said smugly. A bunch of amused laughter came from the crowd as Sarah recoiled slightly, looking disgusted.

“Don’t speak to her that way.” Raphael snapped.

“You’re right. I’ll do that after dinner. Anyway-“ He ripped the microphone off of the podium and stepped around it, closer to the crowd before Raphael could retort.

“This place is boring.” He said loudly. “Listen to me. All of you. There’s more to life than just sitting around all day, studying and worrying about the future. Sometimes… you just gotta live for today!”

He thrust his finger up into the sky.

“And that’s what I’ll do, as President!” He said. “I’ll create a system that gives you what you really want! It’ll be Epstein Island… but for students!”

Sarah stood up. She slammed her palms on the table and glared at him. If looks could kill, Dickson’s death would be instant and painful.

“Enough.” She said sharply. He kept on talking.

“You know those big titty goth girls that go to the public school in town?” he asked. “I’ll hire them on as strippers. You know the movie stars that want beautiful, young teenage girls? The club will set you up to meet them. You know all of these expensive trips you wanted to take and all of the things you wanted to have? I’ll give them to you, on the school’s dime!”

He brought his finger down.

“And… Starting today… I will own a club just across the street that will run at all times, including school hours! Until the day I die… I will be partying with the students here Morning, Noon, And Night!”

He threw the microphone down on the ground and made his way back to the seat. The Japanese girl Anzu gave him a shocked look. She seemed so completely at odds with his speech that Sarah had to gesture for her to take the podium next.

She stood up, and walked towards the microphone. She kneeled down to pick it up, and in a flash Dick had stepped behind her and lifted up her skirt, showing off her leg.

“Eeek!”

Sarah pounded her hands on the table. She had completely forgotten herself.

“That is unacceptable!” She screeched. “Security!”

Stella was already directing them forward with her finger. It was all Raphael could do to stop himself from leaping over the table and beating the shit out of him himself.

Anzu was so rattled that she was blubbering gibberish as security stepped onto the stage and grabbed Dick.

“THIS IS SO FUN!” Dick screamed, laughing, as he kicked his legs uncontrollably, as he was dragged off stage. Sarah was staring at him intently. Her mind was whirling a mile a minute.

“Anzu!”

Raphael leapt over the table and went to go comfort her.

“Minna… no me no mae da…”

“I know…” Raphael said comfortingly, although he had no idea what she was saying. “Do you need a moment to compose yourself before your speech?”

“I… still have to go?” She asked, sounding alarmed. She cast a look towards the crowd in front of her, and then broke down into tears.

In the end she was so overwhelmed that she chose to sit out of the debate entirely. And just like that their entire plan ended in disaster.

…

“I’d say Anzu deserves to win.”

Sarah shot him a dark look as she twirled the cigarette in between her fingers. She had smoked several since returning back to the office. She look positively rattled.

“You’re only saying that because you feel sorry for her.” Sarah said. “A leader can’t show her feelings publicly like that. If she tries to pursue a career in politics this will follow her forever.”

“She couldn’t help Dick-“

“It wasn’t what happened to her that was the problem. It was how she reacted to it.” Sarah said. “People can’t trust someone who acts so emotionally to lead them.”

“This is a high school election.” Raphael said. “No one here is expected to be perfect-“

“This school will set the standard world wide.” She snapped. Raphael was taken aback for a second. “We have an obligation to be the best we can be possibly be!”

She turned away from him and turned to the window, still smoking thoughtfully. Her eyes were half lidded behind her glasses. She appeared to be in deep contemplation.

“We need to play a little dirty…” She said slowly. “But how?’

Raphael looked at her.

“Dick said that he intended to keep his business open even after he left the school.” He said slowly.
“How is paying for something like that?”

“He’s investing all of that drug money into a legitimate business venture.” Sarah said grimly. “This is the downside of allowing students so much power.”

Sarah closed her eyes, and nodded.

“But it has to be done.” She said softly. “People like Richard Dickson may abuse their freedom… but it is up to people like us to put a stop to it. Without trampling the rights of others.”

“What do you suggest we do?”

“We allow the club to go into business.”

Raphael nodded, his expression grim. They had no choice: Forcing Dickson to back down on his chosen career path would set a bad precedent. They had no choice. It had to be done. What really mattered was stopping him from winning his presidential election.

“It opens today. We’ll have to go and scope it out.”

“We?” Sarah asked. “I can’t go. It’ll reflect badly on me. You can’t have the class president going to a place like that. Like some kind of.. common girl.” She sounded revolted at the very idea.

Raphael tilted his head and looked at her. He took several steps forward, and reached for her glasses.

“H-Hey-“

He wrapped his other around her head and ruffled up her hair a little as he pulled the glasses away, and placed them on the cuff of his own shirt.

“There. Now you’re my girlfriend from another school.”

She scowled at him.

“Very funny.” She said. “Give them back!”

Stella came back into the room. She was glancing down at a piece of paper she had printed out.

“Morning, Noon, and Night has lines going outside the building-“

She glanced up, and gave a bit of a start. Her eyes swept across the room, and then back towards Sarah. She frowned, tilting her head to the side.

“Who is this girl?” She asked Raphael. “Where’s the President?’

Sarah stared at her, open mouthed. She seemed at a complete loss for word. Raphael gave Sarah an exasperated look.

“She went home for the day.” Raphael said, as he took Sarah’s arm. “Take care of things while I’m gone.”

“H-hey… wait a minute!”

Raphael led Sarah out of the room and into the hallway.

“She… didn’t recognize me.” Sarah said, a little shaken.

“Yeah, because no one ever sees you without your glasses.” Raphael snickered. “You look like a completely different person.”

She walked along with him in silence for a bit. People tilted their heads to look at them. No one they passed by seemed to recognize her at all.

“It’s nice…” She said slowly. “Being among the students like this.”

“That’s right.” Raphael said. “You’ve never been just part of the crowd, have you?”

She nodded.

“Every day I’ve been hard at work.” She said. “I… suppose I missed out on a normal high school life huh?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Oh?”

“I think you’re living an extraordinary one.”

She giggled

“You’re flattering me.”

“I don’t think so.” Raphael said slowly. “What you’ve done with this place… for the students here… it’s amazing.”

“It’s not enough.”

“Nothing will ever be enough.” Raphael said. “But… other people are inspired by you. I know I am.”

They stopped in the hallway. They turned to look at each other.

“You think so?” She asked.

He smiled at her.

“Without you I might have gotten raped by Hayes.”

“Ha.” She breathed. She leaned closer to him. “You aren’t his type.”

Raphael leaned closer. “I’m very lucky.” He breathed.

Sarah suddenly felt a little self conscious. She ducked her head, blushing furiously.

“Oh, I can’t be seen like this.” She said. “We have things to do-!”

“Come on.” Raphael said, tugging on her arm. “And try to stay focused this time.” He sounded more amused than put out.

“And I could say much the same to you.” She huffed.

“Let’s do it, then.”

She clutched onto his arm as they walked out of the building, across the parking lot, and to the building next door. A giant sign with the words MORNING, NOON, AND NIGHT were being erected in flashing neon. Sarah marveled at the fact that he had been able to do all of this right under her nose.

They stepped right inside and found a wide open space. As Stella had told them, the entire place was jam packed with students. A couple of them had sampled drinks at the bar, and some others were dancing.

“Welcome, welcome.” Richard Dickson said, beaming, as he approached them. His arms held wide. “I’ve seen you left your office bitch behind and found a new squeeze. What’s your name, sweetie?”

“Her name is Sarah Carnell.” Raphael said. Sarah shot him a condescending look.

“Really?” Richard said, looking surprised. “I see that you have a type…” He leaned in to get a better look at her. Sarah stiffened. She leaned in closer to Raphael to get a little bit of distance from him. “Well, she’s certainly less boring than our current President, y’know. Glad you could drop by.”

He wandered off, towards where a gaggle of girls were gossiping over drinks.

“He… he didn’t recognize me either.” Sarah said, crestfallen.

“That’s what’s bothering you?” Raphael asked, amused. “You wanted to come incognito, remember?”

“I know, but-“

Richard Dickson leaned over the table and smiled at one of the girls at the table.

They watched as almost immediately a girl threw her drink at him. Her friends all laughed at him as he stood there, drenched.

“He’s really not that popular, is he?” Sarah asked, as Dickson staggered away, swearing profusely.

“Let’s go talk to them.”

Raphael and Sarah stepped over to the group of girls.

“Hey, what’d you do that for?”

The girl rolled her eyes. “He offered us free drinks for a blowjob.” She said. “I can buy my own damn drinks.”

“He did?” Sarah asked, outraged. “That’s terrible!”

“Yeah, well, that’s Dickson for you. All he cares about is getting his dick wet.” The girl stopped, and looked at them curiously.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She said. “I don’t know you, do I? My name is Sierra Portsman.”

“I’m Sarah Carnell.”

Sierra giggled.

“Oh, that’s rough. You have the same name as the class president, huh? I don’t envy you. And you are?” She addressed Raphael. Sarah stood there, her expression fixed.

“I’m her boyfriend, Raphael.”

Sarah glanced at him, but did not contradict him.

“Oh yeah, you’re that baseball guy.” Sierra said, snapping her fingers. “You’re really killing it out there. Pauper was just telling me about how you’re taking the team to the world championships.”

“Thank you.” Raphael said. “What do you do?”

“I’m studying to be a journalist.” She said. “We all are.”

“Oh, so did you cover the debate?”

“That’s right.” She said, looking surprised. “You were one of the judges, weren’t you? I hardly recognized you up there, out of uniform.”

Sarah adjusted herself, clearly hoping to get her attention. But Sierra’s eyes were fixed squarely on Raphael.

“I’ve never seen anything like it.” She said quietly. “We’ve studied presidential debates in class, but that was the worst one I’ve ever seen.”

“It was bad.” Raphael admitted. “The President was furious.”

Sierra nodded. She swished what little liquid remained in her cup by shifted the glass back and forth.

“It was a farce.” She said, with disgust. “Nobody up there had any idea what they were doing… so Dick Dickson goes up there and steals the show.”

“Just because he got the most attention doesn’t mean-“

“He’s the one that people will remember.” Sarah said shortly. Sierra gave her a surprised look as she leaned forward. “That’s why he opened the club today. To lure in people, win them over gradually, and have them vote for him because he’s the only name they recognize.”

“You know your stuff, girl.” Sierra said, sounding impressed. “Yes, I think Dickson’s strategy is this: Split the vote between the four other candidates while seizing the bulk of the noncommittal votes for himself. Simply being older than most of the other candidates makes him more desirable in office… no matter how poorly run his administration, he will be out by the end of the year. So most people won’t feel the need to come out and vote against him.”

“Anzu is also a junior though.” Raphael said.

“Her.” Sierra said disparagingly. “She blew whatever shot she had when she broke down like that in front of everyone. It’s all anyone will remember about her. She never even gave a speech.”

Raphael glanced at Sarah. Her expression was unreadable. She had said much the same when they discussed the debate back at the office.

“Dickson can’t be allowed to win.”

“You and I agree on that.” Sierra said. “But what can any of us do? The debate was a disaster. The club is open for business. Dickson is the guy everyone’s going to be talking about. Trying to destroy his reputation is just going to make him more popular.”

She took a sip of her cup and blanched.

“Ice melted.” She murmured, as she set the cup down. Sarah was staring intently at her.

“You’re right, of course.” She said. “But I suppose there’s nothing we can do about it.”

Sierra watched her as she reached into her bag and brought out a large textbook.

“What are you doing?” Sierra asked.

“Studying.” Sarah responded. “I was so distracted by the debate that I forgot I have some work to do…”

And she began to read. Her brow furrowed, and her head was bent in concentration. She looked positively adorable.

Sierra and her friends watched her intently, and without a word each of them reached into their bags and procured their own work. They cleared the desk of the drinks and their things on top of it. Raphael looked at them all, and then followed suit.

They sat like that for quite some time. Perhaps half an hour to forty five minutes. It was a nice, pleasant session. Raphael had just finished his novel and was about to move on to his study of Chinese when all of a sudden Dickson came back, looking aggravated.

“What are you doing?”

Sarah looked up at him and blinked. “Studying.”

“You’re supposed to be having fun.” He said testily.

“This is fun.” Sarah said.

He pointed to the door. “No studying allowed. Get out.”

Sarah closed the book with a snap and stood up. Raphael, Sierra, and her friends soon joined them.

“I suppose next time we’ll try the library.” Sarah sniffed. Raphael took her arm and smiled.

“I love how hard you work.” He said affectionately. She rolled her eyes at him as she took his arm. The group made their way to the door. Dickson watched them go, his eyes narrowed.

“You see?” Sarah said, as they made their way across the parking lot. “Dickson just showed us his true colors. He resents us for being so committed to our studies and our careers, and has built this scheme of his to try and bring us all into his line of thinking.”

She reached for Raphael’s cuff and pulled out her glasses. She placed them on her face and adjusted them. As her hands ran behind her head to re-tie her hair Sierra gave a small start.

“M-madame President!”

“I know how we’re going to crush Dickson.” Sarah breathed. “We simply have to be ourselves.”

Stella typed up the announcement that very day. The President, Sarah Carnell, would be hosting a career event at Dickson’s club. All would be welcome. The idea was to come by, meet other people in fields different than their own, and network.

“This is a club!” Dickson exclaimed, as Sarah walked around, cigarette in hand. “We’re supposed to be having fun!”

“There’s a time and a place for fun.” Sarah said, firmly. “But school is not it.”

Dickson glowered at her.

“We’re not going to be in school forever.” He said reproachfully.

“No.” Sarah said. “But we need to do our part to make the world a better place.”

It became a sort of ritual. She and Raphael would stop by the club every day to study and relax, and a number of their friends would come by to join them. Peter, Stella, even Lavender Lowell came by and talked. About their studies, about their careers, about their plans for the future.

"What are you doing?" Dickson would snap at them, often spilling his drinks onto the club floor. "You're supposed to be having fun!"

More and more he began lashing out at his customers- those who wanted to dance were harassed to dance with him, and those who wanted to listen to music were told that it was his club and that they would only listen to the tracks that he thought were cool. Over a period of days people stopped coming in, and those that did return they kept a wide berth from Dickson. Even those that had initially liked the club's vibe began to dread interacting with him, and more and more people found themselves staying away.

More and more often they would see him openly snorting cocaine on tables, loudly proclaiming how much fun he was having. More and more he began to ask other people to join him, and then demand that they do. More often than not those he would pressure would get up and leave, never to return.

One day it was Sarah and Raphael sitting alone in the empty club. Dickson had gotten out a giant bottle of booze and was glaring at them from across the bar. Piles and piles of dishes that he would not clean piled up behind him. He looked positively haggard. He had been sleeping in the club in between bits of drug fueled mania, and looked a mess. In spite of the name, the only time anyone came into the club was during the day… during the night hours Richard Dickson was left to his own devices.

"What did you do, Carnell?" He rasped. "I… I was supposed to win!"

She closed her book with a snap and stood up.

“Nothing.” She said. “People weren’t enjoying themselves here. That’s all.”

Dickson stared at her in a drunken mess.

“You bitch.” He said. “You did this! You-“

He teetered slightly, and fell over. He was struggling to stand as Sarah took Raphael’s arm.

“Let’s go.” Sarah said.

She led him to the door and out into the street. The club now had no guests at all- and school had just let out.

“There is nothing wrong with having fun.” Sarah said quietly. “But the students here are studying for a reason. The school has made its choice.”

She looked somewhat melancholy for a second.

“Hey.” Raphael said. “We didn’t get anything to eat. Why don’t you come over? Angelica has been asking after you.”

“Call her to let her know we’re coming.” Sarah said. He smiled at her sheepishly.

“I already did.”

Sarah rolled her eyes.

“You knew I would say yes.”

“I did.”

“You seem to know me very well now, Raphael.”

“Yeah.” He said. “I’m courting you now, aren’t you?”

“Oooooh, old school.” She said. It came out in a bit of a purr, but she wasn’t embarrassed about it. “What did people do back in the day during courtship?”

They looked at each other.

“We’ll do things our own way.” Raphael said. Sarah beamed at him, and found herself leaning into him more than usual as they walked to his car.

Angelica was putting the finishing touches on dinner as they walked through the door.

“Sit tight, ‘til it’s just right!”

“Do you need any help?” Raphael asked anxiously.

He had right to be concerned. Angelica was no stranger to cooking, but she had overdone it. A spread larger than what the three of them could eat lay before them on the table.

“This might make a week’s worth of meals for me.” Sarah said.

“Oh, you can take some of it home.” Angelica said brightly. “Hang on, let me see...”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly…”

“No, you’re our guest.” Angelica said primly, waving her hand. She stood up and walked back to the kitchen. "Raphael where are the food containers?”

“Eat first.” Raphael said, exasperated.

The three of them had a very long, pleasant meal. Angelica told them all about how her boy she liked wanted to be a firefighter, and Raphael told them all about the trip he had taken with the baseball team.

“You’re both graduating high school soon.” Angelica said. “You’re going to be real adults.”

Sarah nodded.

“Will your parents be throwing a graduation party?” Angelica inquired. “They must be very proud of you.”

There was a dead silence around the room.

“No.” Sarah said. “They won’t be.”

“Oh, I see.” Angelica said hurriedly, sensing she had touched a sore spot. “Well… why don’t you come to ours?”

“Oh, I would just be-“

“You should come.” Raphael interjected. “I want you there.”

Sarah looked at them and then smiled.

“Then I would love to.” She said warmly.

Raphael handled the dishes that night, so Angelica and Sarah found themselves in the living room. Sarah’s pen was darted around a spare sheet of paper.

“See, it’s easy.” She breathed.

“Wow.” Angelica said. “You’re really good at math.”

“Thank you.” Sarah said. “But I’m not specializing in it… you’ll be better than me by the time you get to the Academy.”

“If I get in.” Angelica said gloomily. “It’s so difficult…”

“You can do it.” Sarah said, firmly. “And even if you fail you can attend another school. People who put in the effort can succeed anywhere.”

“I guess.” Angelica said quietly. “But Raphael had to give up on studying… he’s happier with you, I know, but…”

“Everyone has their talents.” Sarah said. “And your brother… he’s where he belongs right now.”

Angelica giggled. “You mean with you?”

Sarah’s face reddened.

“Perhaps.” She said stiffly.

“Are you going to marry him?”

Sarah pulled her pencil back and twiddled it in between her fingers. She felt a strange sense of dread well up within her.

“I don’t know.” She said quietly. “My career-“ Angelica looked at her and frowned.

“You sound like a boomer.” She said accusingly. Sarah flinched, but responded almost immediately.

“You never knew any boomers, you’re too young.”

“Don’t change the subject. Your career is important, but love matters most of all. You have to get married and start a family if you’re going to live a fulfilling life.”

“I know that.” Sarah said. “It’s just…” She struggled find the words. “I want to help people.” She said. “And maybe…. Raphael won’t be able to help me achieve that goal.”

“He’s been helping you already.”

“I know that, but… I need someone to support me. Like an equal.”

“You look down on him.”

“I didn’t say that.” Sarah said quickly. She felt a little bit embarrassed. She was being honest, and genuine... it was how she really felt. But saying it loud like that... it made her seem as if she didn’t care about Raphael at all.

“You did.” Angelica said. “You think he’s dumb because he’s into sports, don’t you?”

“No. I don’t look down on people for-“

“Then why won’t you love him?”

Sarah looked down.

"I'm worried… that us being together isn't the best idea for either of us." She said. "I cannot make decisions based on fleeting feelings… no. I want to be President of the United States. Everything I do must be perfect… and that includes who I spend my life with."

She spoke with a kind of finality. Angelica looked at her.

"You really are a boomer." She said. For once in her life Sarah was at a complete loss for words.

I have to be better than this

I cannot let myself get so utterly beaten by a twelve year old.

Before she could think of anything to say, Raphael came back into the room. She stood up- so quickly that Angelica was taken aback, and glanced towards Raphael.

"Take me home." She commanded. He looked at her in surprise. "Something's come up." She said, in a gentler tone. Raphael turned to his sister.

"Go to bed, Angelica."

Angelica gave them both a look.

"Well, okay." She said. "But when I bring MY boyfriend over for dinner, we get to stay out late too." And then she flounced upstairs.

They watched her go. Now that it was over, Sarah felt herself calm down. She hadn't been expecting that at all. It was one thing to have those kind of dark thoughts in her own head, but to see them come from another person, out of the blue… it had rattled her.

"She's a good child." Sarah said softly. She was surprised at how genuinely she felt that, considering what had just happened.

"She is." Raphael said, smiling. "What's the emergency?"

Sarah hesitated. Her first instinct was to lie- but she forced down the feeling almost immediately. She knew she had to be honest with him about what had just happened.

“There was no emergency.” She said quietly. She gripped her bag tightly in her hands. “Oh, Raphael… I don’t know what to do. When I look at how things are now, with us, it all seems so perfect… but when I think of how far I still have to go-“

“I will support you.” Raphael said gently.

“I know that!” Sarah said, her voice hot. “I just… don’t know if you can offer me what I really need.”

There was a deathly silence.

“I’m sorry.” Sarah said quietly. “It’s selfish of me, I know. But it’s how I feel, and I won’t play games with you. I’m not… I’m not a boomer.”

Raphael laughed. It took her aback for a second- she was almost certain that he would be angry with her.

“Did Angelica call you one?” He teased. “Is that what this is about?”

She flushed.

“N-no.” She stammered. She deflated as he gave her a disbelieving look. “I’m sorry… yes. That’s what she did. And it bothered me.”

“Why?”

“When she said it, I knew it was true.” Sarah said. “I’ve spent my entire life fighting the boomer mentality, and in the end I succumb to it… just like my parents did…”

“The boomer is eternal.” Raphael said. Sarah eyes widened in shock. She had to stop herself from slapping him.

“That’s not funny.” Sarah snapped. “That’s not funny at all!”

“It’s not, I’m sorry.” Raphael said quickly. He took her hands and gripped them firmly. “No one’s expecting you to be perfect-“

“They are-“

“You can make mistakes-“

“No I can’t-“

“And you can love who you want.”

“Can I?” Sarah asked, her voice on edge. “Can I, after all that’s happened? We can’t just love whoever we want! We have to think about what’s best for our families, and for our country! If I were to marry you… how would that help my presidency?”

Raphael gave her a wide eyed stare.

“We’ll have lots of beautiful children.”

She couldn’t help it. She laughed. All of her doubts and reservations began to melt away.

“I think people will like that about you.” He said. “I know I do.”

“You think so…”

“I know so…”

Sarah rolled her eyes and smiled at him. “Okay fine.” She said. “You win. I’ll try to love you.”

“You’ll try?”

She leaned towards him.

“I always get what I want… when I try.” She said huskily. What kind of line was that? She asked herself wildly. She was making herself look like an idiot.

They looked at each other, and then broke down into giggles.

“I should apologize to Angelica.” Sarah said. “We were fighting about this, just before you-.”

“I heard every word!” Angelica called, from the top of the stairs. Sarah looked up at her, mortified, as Raphael placed a hand on her arm.

“Come on, let’s go… so she can’t hear us.”

Sarah was blushing as Angelica’s laughter began to fade away as they walked back to the car. It was almost like the fight between them had never happened.

“I think it’s good that you’re so concerned about the future.” Raphael said. “It’s so… different from what I’m used to.”

“Oh?”

He smiled grimly. “Growing up it was always… you’re the best in the league, you’re the best there is. Keep it up and you’ll go pro.”

Sarah nodded.

“I hated it.” Raphael said quietly. “It never felt real to me. It never felt like it really mattered.”

“It does to some people.”

“But not to me.” Raphael said. “Growing up… people would tell me how lucky I was that I would get to go pro, and live the lives they always wanted. It made me think…. That their lives must be shallow and empty to ever envy another person. I wanted… to live a good life regardless of whether or not I went pro.”

“I think you are.” Sarah said.

“Because I met you.” He said. He reached over and gripped her hand. He held it all through the drive back to the school. Sarah felt almost as if she were flying, and that it would last forever.

Flashing lights of ambulances had gathered in front of the school. Sarah sat up, releasing Raphael's hand and glaring intently at the front.

"Let me out." She said. "I need to see this."

He parked the car and they crossed the parking lot to the front of Morning, Noon, and Night.

A group of paramedics were carrying someone out of the club.

"Is that a student?" Sarah demanded.

"Yes, ma'am… it's Richard Dickson. He OD'ed.

Sarah stared at the body being carefully placed into the ambulance. Raphael placed his hand on her shoulder.

"I think we had more fun tonight than he did." He said softly. Sarah nodded, faintly, and then turned around back to the school.

Act 4

The last days of school passed by in a haze. Final exams were taken, teachers gave lectures varying from genuine heartfelt concerns about their futures to breaking down in tears about how their own lives had ended the instant they had entered the real world.

For Sarah, however, this was the beginning of something greater.

"Cheers." Lavender said softly, as she poured them a cup of wine.

She had dropped by after getting clearance from the hospital for an extended leave for the day. She, Sarah, and Raphael were sitting around in Sarah's office enjoying her last day in power.

"What are you doing once you're a free woman?" Lavender asked.

"I'll be planning for the next election." Sarah said, sipping her wine.

"Oh you." Lavender said. Raphael smiled at her.

“You’re not in a position to make fun of her, you know. You almost killed yourself playing tennis.”

“Yes, well…” Lavender said, shrugging her slender shoulders. “You talked me out of it. Both of you.”

“Do you want to join us for dinner, Lavender?” Raphael asked. “We’re having a bit of a party after school lets out.”

“Just the three of us?” Lavender asked, flipping her hair behind her shoulder. Sarah frowned at her.

“No, we just want to see you.” Raphael said.

“That’s very kind, but I think I’ll have to pass… I only came by today because I didn’t want to miss my last day of high school.” Lavender said. She smiled ruefully. “It’s funny… I hardly spent any time here at all, and yet I feel strangely attached to it.”

“I feel the same way.” Raphael admitted. “And I was only here for three months.”

“Your life is defined by what you do when you’re young.” Sarah said quietly. “Our entire lives have built up to this moment… and from now on we’ll be adults.”

There was a heavy silence.

“I’m glad.” Lavender said, her voice quiet. “That I’ll get to live to see twenty.”

Her hand trembled a little bit. Sarah gently placed her hand on it, and squeezed reassuringly. “We’re here for you.” She said quietly. “Both of us.”

Lavender nodded. She looked between both Sarah and Raphael. She looked like she might break down into tears.

“I don’t think… I deserve such great friends.”

“You do.” Raphael said encouragingly. “People look up to you, you know? Someday… Sarah Carnell is going to become President. And the best women’s tennis player in the world will be on her side.”

Lavender looked at Sarah and nodded.

“That was always your dream…” She said quietly. “Oh, Sarah…. I can’t begin to tell you how glad I am that you never changed.”

She sniffled, and then stood up.

“I should be going.” She said apologetically. “I hate to be taking up too much of the President’s time.”

“We’ll see you at graduation, I’m sure.” Sarah said. “We should spend more time together after. I… want to keep being friends, after high school.”

Lavender smiled widely at her.

“So do I.” She said warmly.

“Raphael, drive her back to the hospital.” Sarah said. “I need to clean up this place before I leave office.”

“No problem.” Raphael said. “I guess this is it, huh? Your last act as President?”

“Yes.” Sarah said. She smiled at him. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“I love you.”

Sarah gave a small start and stared at him, eyes wide. Lavender gave her a look, and then shook her head.

“Don’t mind her.” She said, as she grabbed onto Raphael’s arm and gave it a big of a tug. “She’s clueless about this stuff. She loves you too.”

“I know she does.” Raphael said. He gave Sarah one last smile, as he and Lavender stepped out of the office.

“You go in there with Sarah and come out with another girl.” She heard Stella say to him, as the door shut behind them. Sarah was now alone with her thoughts.

She had practically lived in this office for the past four years. She was surprised at how many personal effects she had lying about. The picture of her and Lavender after they had won a national doubles tournament together sat on her table. She picked it up and stared at. She marveled at how, for a very long time, she feared that she would never be that close to Lavender again…

The photograph, and a few other odds and ends, found their way into her bag, which had been cleared of all of her school things. She procured a little duster and began dusting off her desk. She felt a little bit wistful.

A knock came at the door.

“Come in.”

Stella stepped inside.

“There’s… someone to see you madame.”

Sarah straightened herself and glanced backward.

“At this hour?” She would relinquish the position of President at 5:00, to allow time for the new President to move in and begin preparations for her term next semester.

But for now, she was still the sitting president. And she still had obligations.

“Send the guest in.”

Stella bowed, and stepped out into her office. Usually the guest would come right on in… but for some reason, he or she did not right away. Sarah stood, facing the door, feeling a strange sense of apprehension.

The door opened.

A tall, well kempt man in his late twenties stepped through the door. His face was handsome and intelligent, and his suit indicated status.

“Madame President.” He said, and his voice sent shivers throughout her entire body. He held out his hand to her, and she took it. “A pleasure.”

She was expecting a handshake, but to his surprise he bent down and kissed her hand. She felt a strange electricity run through her entire body. Her knees felt weak.

“And you are?” She asked, as she pulled away from him, trying to keep her expression neutral. He smiled at her, and stood up to his full height. He towered over her.

“I am Baron Graham.” He said. “Perhaps… you’ve heard of my father?”

She stared at him. The wheels were turning in her head.

“Your father is a presidential candidate.” She said. “He’s a favorite to win the next election.”

“The people’s favorite, maybe, but not the establishment.” Sarah began to laugh, and then stopped herself. Baron stared down at her reassuringly. She was shocked to find herself feeling completely comfortable and at ease with a complete stranger. She hated herself for it: she had to learn to be more discerning.

“I don’t know what the son of such a prominent politician wants to do with me,” Sarah began. “But I will certainly do anything I can for you… while I’m still in office, at any rate.” She checked the clock behind him. “You have twenty minutes.”

Graham nodded.

“I doubt you know this.” He began. “But I am an alumni of this school. I graduated here, ten years ago. I served as-“

“Ah, yes. You were class president then.” Sarah said. “You were responsible for cracking down on teachers pushing extremist political views in class.”

“Marxist ideas, Sarah.”

“I was trying to be political.”

“Don’t be.” He said. “I’m told that you despise all forms of communism.”

“All those that still exist.” Sarah said. “That ideology has burned itself out. Rather like the hippie movement by the 70’s.”

“Yes, but on a much wider scale.” Baron Graham said. “You’re younger than I… you didn’t get to see firsthand how insane these people were at the height of their power and influence.”

Sarah looked at him.

“Don’t misunderstand me.” He said. “But when I was growing up woke culture- that’s what we called it back then- had controlled academia for decades. It wasn’t until people started getting uncomfortable in the twenty tens that it started to die out. But even today there are enclaves of true believers everywhere… you’ve seen them for yourself.”

“Older people, mostly.” Sarah reflected. “People who want to go back to how things were back then.”

“We can’t let that happen.” Graham said. “I’ve looked at your record, Sarah Carnell, and I’m very impressed with it. I pushed hard to have Hayes fired myself and never managed it-“

“You left me some very useful notes on his patterns and his operations.” Sarah informed him. Graham looked pleased.

“Really? I’m glad to hear that… Tell me. How did you take him out?”

“He went after my boyfriend.”

Graham looked startled for a moment, and then laughed. "Well, it was a fitting end for him, at any rate." He said. "I've told my father that I want him executed… like all pedophiles."

"He has to be convicted first."

"I will do everything in my power to ensure that he is." He promised her. Sarah felt her heart swell. Although she had stripped Hayes of his teaching credentials and ruined his operation at the Academy, a part of her had feared that he would somehow get off scot free for his crimes. The fact that another person of influence was supporting her in this matter was reassuring to her.

"Is that what you wanted to come here for?" She asked. "To congratulate me on taking out Hayes?"

His eyes flickered.

"That is part of it." He said. "I want to know… what are your plans after high school?"

"I want to go into politics." She said curtly. "I intend to move to D.C. and start networking. With my credentials and record, I'll be able to land an internship. Perhaps with your father's people."

"We would be glad to have you." He said softly. "I confess that's why I came."

"Really?" Sarah asked, a little apprehensively.

"Yes." Graham said. "Sarah, I've looked at your records. You cut the budgetary spending to record lows and improved learning conditions at the school. You show an incredible knack for administrative work. And what's more… you show passion for doing the right thing, for the people. I was very impressed."

She was flattered, but was politically savvy enough to know that he wanted something from her.

"What do you want?" She asked. He had five minutes.

“Sarah… will you marry me?”

You could hear a pin drop. Sarah stared at him, hardly moving, and then exhaled slowly. She couldn’t afford to rebuke him outright. Not someone with his background. She had her career to consider.

“You must be joking.” She said, trying to keep her voice neutral.

“I’m not.” He said quietly. “Not at all.”

They looked at each other.

“I don’t know you.” Sarah said bluntly. There was no diplomatic way to put it.

“It will be a political marriage.” Graham said. “Look… Sarah… I know your dream. You want to become President of the United States. I also know that you have no family connections… your parents abandoned you when you were very young, and you’ve been living at this school ever since. Technically once the bell rings you will be homeless… although I’m told you’ve made short term arrangements to live in a hotel.”

Sarah stiffened. She had never discussed her living situation with anyone.

“I can give you what no one else can.” Graham said. “A real shot at the Presidency, while you’re still young and the contempt for marxism is still strong among the public. My Father will either win the presidency or come very close. If you marry me you will have first hand experience at the daily lives of the political Elite. You will be able to network and form real connections and knowledge as you prepare for your own presidential run. You will reach your goals far more quickly than if you simply worked your way up.”

“You’re trying to buy my hand in marriage.” Sarah said quietly.

“No, of course not.” Graham said. “This is what’s best for both of us. I’ve studied your ability, and I know that you show a prodigious talent for what you want to do… but I also know that if your talent is

not properly utilized by the right people, there is a strong possibility that you may fail. Do you think that the system built by the boomers is going to collapse overnight? There are people who will die to protect it."

Sarah closed her eyes.

"You want me to marry you… to combat the marxists."

"Yes." Graham said quietly. "I need a family that I can trust, and that means marrying a smart, classy lady who understands the enemy we're fighting. I imagine, like a lot of women, you were putting off the idea of marriage to focus on your career.

Sarah hesitated. He was absolutely right.

"I was." She admitted. "But… only for the sake of my dream."

He nodded, his expression grim.

"A lot of people make that mistake." He said. "They fight for their dream, and forget to live."

He was right. Sarah thought, a touch bitterly. He had come to the same conclusion that Angelica had. That in spite of her posturing, in spite of all she had done, in spite of everything… in her core of cores she had always prioritized her political career over her personal life.

"Do you think that makes me a bad person?"

"Not at all." He said. "You were going to make a mistake, that's all."

"Some would say that marrying you for my career would be a bigger mistake."

"And they would be right to think that." He said. "I don't want to force you. In fact, I don't even want you to agree right away."

Sarah shook her head. "How considerate of you." She said. "But you come to me on the day I leave high school and ask for my hand in marriage…"

“As I said, time is of the essence.” He said. “I would love to have a real courtship with you, but if we’re going to take the political world by storm… I need you to consider this now.”

He leaned forward.

“Imagine.” He said. “If I were to become president, and then you… after our children are already grown… we could establish a true political dynasty. We could stay in power long enough to prevent our enemies from ruining things again once we’re out of office. And of course, our family will work tirelessly to continue our legacy, after we’re gone.”

She nodded slowly. It was like a dream… it was everything she had ever wanted. And yet…

“I’m not asking you to love me.” Graham said quietly. “I’m giving you an opportunity to make your dreams a reality.”

“Love…” Sarah repeated. She closed her eyes. She thought of Raphael, and how distant she felt to him at times. She had been keeping him distant for this exact reason. For the moment she knew that she would have to leave him behind.

She could not allow herself to be selfish. She could not allow herself to marry for love. If she was to become the best politician she could…

She needed this.

She nodded, and held out her hand to him.

“I hope you thought to bring a ring.” She said.

He shook his head as he took her hand.

“Sorry.” He said quietly. “I’ll make it up to you, I promise. I know this isn’t very romantic-“

“Romance isn’t what the country needs.” Sarah said quietly.

“I’m glad we agree.” Graham said softly. They stared at each other for a while. She felt nothing other than a sense of satisfaction. Her path to the presidency was now set.

“We should be seen in public together for a while until we officially announce the engagement.” He said. “We should have dinner this weekend. We can discuss our policies then.”

“That sound lovely.” Sarah said. It dawned on her then that she wasn’t being genuine. She was being a politician.

Some doubt must have shown on her face because Graham stroked her hand reassuringly.

“It’s alright.” He said soothingly. “I know how hard this must be for you… how sudden. But it must be done.”

He released her, and then gave her one last smile.

“Expect a formal invitation.” He said. “We’ll have lots to talk about.”

He bowed his head towards her politely, and stepped out of the office.

She checked the clock. It was 5:00. She was no longer President of the Academy. With a heavy heart, she stepped forward to the door to find Stella waiting outside, holding a key.

“You sure took your time.” Stella said. “Who was that man?

She reached forward and locked the door behind her. Sarah doubted she would ever step foot in that room again. But after what had just happened she could barely process it. Her adult life had begun so suddenly that it had rattled her.

“He was a politician. Looking to recruit me to his campaign.”

“Really?” Stella looked impressed. “That’s fantastic. I’m happy for you.”

Sarah hardly knew what she was doing. She dropped her bag and wrapped her arms around Stella. She let out a surprised gasp.

"Madame-"

"Call me Sarah." Sarah said quietly. "You're not my secretary anymore, are you? We're just friends."

Stella wrapped her arms around her and hugged her back.

"I am going to miss you, you know." Stella said quietly. "I hope we get to see each other again… in the real world."

Sarah pulled away from her and smiled.

"We will." She promised. "Be sure to put me on your resume, alright? I'll recommend you to anyone."

"Will do." Stella said. "But to be honest… I'd like to work for you again. I never thought I would take pride in being a secretary."

"You should take pride in whatever it is you do." Sarah said. "As long as you provide for other people."

Stella smiled at her.

"I hope you do become President." She said.

They walked out the door together, and Stella locked the front door too. They gave each other one last look.

"I'll see you at graduation."

"You too."

They parted ways. Sarah couldn't explain it, but she felt a little sad. She and Stella had done such great work together, and now…. It was all over.

Well. They would see each other again. Someday. She took solace in that fact.

She took the long way around the school, giving it one last once over. She spoke to the new class President, Anzu, who was hard at work for making plans for Morning, Noon, and Night.

“People really loved the general vibe.” She said. “The music, the tables… it was a great place to study. I want to re-purpose it as a study hall, and a rec area.”

“No drugs and alcohol, I presume.”

“Of course not.” Anzu said. She hesitated.

“Sarah…” She said quietly. “I think… I only won the election because Richard died.”

Sarah nodded sympathetically.

“I’m worried.” Anzu said. “You were such a great president, and I think I can’t possibly live up to it.”

“You mustn’t compare yourself to me.” Sarah said. “Sometimes… people can rise up to situations and far surpass anyone’s expectations. And other times they have every opportunity in the world and destroy themselves. When I look at you, and when I look at Richard Dickson… I’m thankful that you, at the very least, have the best interests in the students at heart.”

Anzu nodded, her lips tight.

“Perhaps… it would be alright if I were to write you?” She asked timidly. “Just to get your perspectives on things, of course…”

“I’d love to.” Sarah said. “But you must accept that you are the President now, and that you need to stand as a leader on your own.”

“I will.” Anzu promised her. Sarah stepped away from her feeling a strange sense of pride. People would remember her fondly, and would actively seek to emulate her.

Principal Pauper was waiting for her in front of her room.

“Rent’s due.” He said, as she approached.

“Very funny.” She said dryly. “I’m leaving tonight. I have all my things packed and everything.”

His eyes glinted. He feigned concern. “Do you have anyplace you can go?”

“I do.”

“Oh, I see.” He said. “Well, if you need anything… my door is always open. If you like, you could stay in my quarters, you know…”

“Thank you.” Sarah said cordially, as she opened the door and stepped inside. “But I think I’ll manage.”

“I could do a lot for you, you know.” He said. “This is your last chance, Sarah.”

“You never had a chance to begin with.” She said, as she shut the door in his face.

She turned back around and looked at her little room. Everything had been packed neatly away. She had deliberately tried limiting frivolous purchases, so she had been able to fit everything she owned into one small suitcase. It would be easy to carry it to the hotel across town.

She had done very little in this room besides sleep. She did not have nearly the same attachment to it as her office. She gave the room one last once over to be sure that she had not forgotten anything, and then stepped outside.

She rolled the suitcase behind her as she stepped off of the school property, past Morning, Noon, and Night, and out into the real world. She watched as other students stood laughing and embracing each other. Her heart ached. That was one experience she had never allowed herself to have in high school.

“Hey!”

She stopped. She turned her head. Raphael was waving at her.

“Did you forget? We’re having dinner at seven!”

She walked towards him automatically. She felt a little bit dirty as she stepped inside, and placed the suitcase in between her legs. This wasn’t right. She had already made her decision.

“Got everything?” He asked.

“Yes. Did Lavender get back alright?”

“She did. She really wanted to come to dinner with us, but she had to go get her treatment.”

“We’ll have to invite her next time.” Sarah said idly. She had to remind herself that there wouldn’t be a next time. Raphael put the car in drive and it began to move.

“She’s a really funny girl.” Raphael said conversationally. “Way funnier than you.”

“That isn’t hard.”

“And she’s better at tennis.”

“She better be, after sticking with it for so long.”

It was so natural, so easy, so fun to talk to Raphael. She dreaded when she had to tell him what she had decided to do. It would have to be tonight.

“I’m glad she’s doing so well.” Raphael said wistfully. “After everything that’s happened… it feels so unreal, you know?”

She nodded, her expression set. She couldn’t wait until tonight. The realization dawned on her like a sack of bricks. The longer she stayed around Raphael… the harder it would be to break away.

“Raphael.” She said softly. “Park the car.”

He gave her a look.

“I said park the car.” She said, a little bit more forcefully.

He pulled over into a gas station. She opened the door and stepped out.

“What is it?” Raphael asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Raphael…” Sarah said. “I can’t keep leading you on like this. I can’t be with you. I’m sorry.”

She spoke almost robotically. Raphael looked at her.

“Something happened.” He said.

“Yes.” She said. “I received the opportunity of a lifetime. I can’t pass this up. The fate of our culture depends on it.” A shadow crossed her face. “I don’t want things to be like they were… before.”

They stared at each other. Raphael’s hand gripped the steering wheel.

“Fine.” He said shortly. “I’ll see you at graduation.”

She shut the door for him and looked after him.

“I’m sorry.” She said quietly. She wasn’t sure if he could hear her through the glass as he took off.

She was tempted to reach into her pocket and pull out a smoke, but now she had to walk back. She wheeled her suitcase back, and realized that she was crying.

I had to do this.

I had to.

For my…

For the country…

…

Raphael walked into the house.

"Welcome back!" Angelica chirped. "The cake is on the-" She stopped, frowning. "Where's Sarah?"

"She broke up with me."

"Oh no!" Angelica gasped, putting her hand over her mouth. "Why?"

"She didn't say." Raphael said. "But she was pretty clear about it." He was trying not to let his disappointment show, but Angelica knew him too well for that.

"It was a career thing, wasn't it?" She asked anxiously. "She thought it wouldn't work… after you both graduated."

"She did say she had the opportunity of a lifetime." Raphael said grimly. "It must have been huge… to drop all of her plans like that…"

"You don't want someone who would abandon you like this." Angelica said immediately.
Raphael smiled at her affectionately.

"Yeah… you're right." He said. He tussled her hair with his hand. "I thought she was great, you know? She did so much for me…"

"Me too." Angelica glowered. "Oh, I TOLD her not to be a boomer!"

She turned around towards the kitchen.

"You'll cheer up once you have some of my cake." She called after him. He nodded, but did not answer her. He knew that he would not get over this for a very, very long time.

He looked around at the brightly lit room and realized how empty it felt without her. The piece of himself that he had needed more than anything had been taken away right when he needed her most.

She didn't need you

He had known that. She had told him that. And still in the end he had lost her.

He knew he shouldn't be so rattled by it- but he had liked her a lot, and was certain that she felt the same way.

Why, then?

What was the point?

Raphael took in a deep breath of air and tried to calm down. He would see her at the graduation ceremony. He would corner her and make her say-

"Raphael?"

Angelica was staring in the doorway. She was looking at him rather anxiously.

"I'm sorry." Raphael said. "I'm very upset."

She smiled. "I am too." She said quietly. "She was great… I would have loved for her to be in the family." She tilted her head. "But if she really doesn't want to be here… why pine for her?"

It was good advice, but something about it didn't sit right with him.

"Come on." He said. "Let's see that cake."

The cake had been lovingly adorned with baseball themed icing. An little figurine of Raphael himself stood on top of the cake spelling out the words 'CONGRATS GRADS.' Raphael immediately noticed that the icing on top of the cake had been disturbed… a little figurine that had been carefully placed on top next to his own had been removed.

"Dinner, first." Angelica told him, rather sternly. He nodded, as they sat down to a meal of steak, potatoes, and broccoli.

"You're getting better at handling meats." Raphael told her.

“I’ve been practicing.’ She said. “I hated doing it at first because if I screwed up I would be wasting food… but I’m really getting the hang of it.”

“It’s perfect.” Raphael said. “I still remember when all you wanted to make was sweets.”

She made a face at him. “I just baked you a cake.” She said. “Don’t lecture me now.” Angelica had initially gotten into baking to satisfy her sweet tooth, and Raphael had made it a point for a long time to not eat sweets at every meal. It was a bit of a sore point between them.

Still, though, there was no denying that the cake was delicious.

“I wonder if you can be a chef.”

“Ha.” Angelica said dryly. “I think I’ll stick with something more respectable.”

“There’s nothing unrespectable about being a chef.”

“Maybe, but then I’ll be cooking meals for you all the time.”

“That would make me happy.”

“That’s true.” Angelica said. Her eyes shone. “But that doesn’t mean I need to pursue a career in it, huh?” She looked distant, and contemplative.

“You’re not going to be here when you play ball professionally much… are you?”

“No.” Raphael said. “And because you’re in the program you can’t come with me.”

Angelica nodded. Her face seemed a little sad.

“I’m going to miss you.”

He smiled at her.

“It’s not like I’ll be going away for good.” He said. “I’ll come right back and visit you whenever I can. Promise.”

She nodded, but she looked apprehensive. Living on her own at twelve years old must have been a scary prospect for her.

“Maybe you could try getting some roommates with girls from similar backgrounds.” Raphael suggested.

“Maybe.” Angelica said quietly. “I don’t know… I’ll have to talk about it with the school.” She looked troubled. “Growing up is hard.”

“It gets better.” Raphael told her. And he knew that it was true.

They finished their cake and cleared away their things. Angelica seemed determined to make the most of their last days living together.

“We’re going to have to do something special.”

“I don’t want to spend any money. You still have school to pay for.”

“Aw, come on.”

“I mean it.”

Angelica pouted at him. He found himself thinking of Sarah Carnell, and how much of a stickler she was for her budget.

“After I have a stable income… then we’ll go somewhere.”

“Promise?” She held out her pinkie finger.

“I promise.” He took her finger with his own. She smiled widely at him.

“I can’t wait.” She said, beaming. In that moment, Raphael forgot all of his troubles.

…

Sarah stepped into her hotel room tired and dirty. The trek across town had done a number on her. Her accommodations were much less than what she was used to… she had no intention of paying for nicer lodgings when she hadn't yet solidified her career path forward.

Graham… he would be inviting her out soon. She felt a strange sense of trepidation. She had to impress him.

She set aside her things by the bed and made her way into the bathroom. The mirror was a little dirty, so she had to clean it off before staring at her own reflection in the mirror.

Her expression was surly, her hair looked rather unkempt whenever it wasn't tied up in a bun, and her glasses made her look more like a librarian than a serious politician. She wondered if the way she looked would put off voters from supporting her.

No, she was being silly. It was her ideas that mattered, and her ability to lead. No one would vote for her based on how attractive she was, and yet…

She found herself fretting over the fact that if she were seen looking like this in public, it would somehow tank their chances at winning an election in the future. Her photo and image would be broadcast everywhere by their own campaign and that of their political opponents.

She HAD to be better.

She HAD to look the part.

She HAD to support Graham, no matter what.

She undid her hair and let it fall over her shoulders. She stared at herself in the mirror. She remembered how, when Raphael had done this for her, how she had looked like a completely different person. She wondered if this Sarah would be liked more than the real one.

She spent over an hour in front of the mirror, brushing her hair and fretting. If this did not work… if Graham felt that she was not the woman he thought she was… then she would be right back where she started.

She shivered. She set the brush down and looked down at the sink. What was she doing? Everything had felt like it was falling into place when she was sitting with Raphael and Lavender, talking and laughing about the past, and their future together. But she couldn't bear to speak to either of them now. Maybe in the future, once they had put their high school lives behind them… they could be friends again.

But for now she had to make her dream a reality.

She would have a week until she met with Graham again. She would have a full week to perfect her makeup, change her wardrobe, change her entire persona.

She had to do it.

She had to.

…

Sarah had spent the past several days walking around town in a daze. It struck her how suddenly big the city was now that she wasn't relegated to living at school. There were restaurants, theaters, and museums that she had never even heard of before. It made her feel very small… and more than ever, made her feel as if she was making the right decision.

"You seem distracted." Graham said softly.

She shook her head. She had spent the last week trying to make her hair look somewhat presentable, but she still feared that it was not enough. The two of them had chosen a small, out of the way, nice restaurant to attend. The waitress had not recognized either of them. It dawned on her that outside of the Academy she was still a

complete unknown to the general population. It would be years of work before she climbed the political ladder to have the same amount of control she had had when she was still Class President.

“I’m just thinking.” She said. “I have a lot to learn.”

Graham nodded.

“I’m glad you think that way.” He said. “I know too many people who believe that education stops after schooling is over. No, we never stop learning and growing… not until we die.”

He looked wistful for a moment, and then smiled.

“I don’t mean to be so dour.” He said. “But it is pleasant speaking to an equal for a change. Most girls fret more over their looks than politics.”

Sarah suddenly felt rather self conscious: She had spent far more time fretting over her looks than anything else over the past week. It had not even crossed her mind that Graham would seriously want to hear her thoughts about politics. The realization made her uneasy… she hadn’t believed him when he had told her that he cared about her opinions.

“I’m not an equal.” Sarah said. “You’re the one with the resources and connections, not me.”

“Don’t speak that way. I know people who come from far more well off backgrounds than you own who haven’t accomplished a fraction of what you have. And besides… when we marry, my resources will be your resources.”

Sarah felt her mouth go dry. She hated the idea of marrying upwards… it made her feel as if she were only marrying him for his money. Some reluctance must have shown on her face, because Graham shook his head.

“You are right to be concerned about how people may view our marriage.” Graham said. “I would be remiss not to warn you of what

the enemy will say, and do, but rest assured that as long as you are kind and able, the masses will respect you."

"I'm not entirely sure even my own school respected me." Sarah said. Graham smiled at her.

"It certainly feels that way, doesn't it?" He said. "But I think they did, very much in fact. You won your election four times in a row, after all.

She frowned. She toyed with her drink with her finger, staring down at it.

"Then why… didn't I have friends?"

Graham looked at her.

"We can't be friends with our subordinates." He said quietly. The relationship between the elite and the masses… It's not the same thing as friendship between equals."

She looked up at him.

"Is that why you wanted me?" She asked. "To be your equal?"

He nodded.

"I see." She said quietly. She looked back down at her glass. "I appreciate your honesty."

She stared at her tea, thinking deeply. She wondered if she could allow herself to be vulnerable, around this man she was going to make her husband. She chose to do so.

"Maybe I should be honest as well." She said quietly. "Right now… I'm scared this will not work."

"You are free to refuse me, if you wish."

Sarah shook her head.

“I can’t do that.” She said. “Even if I grow to loathe you… I must close my eyes and think of America.”

She took a sip of her drink. When she looked back at Graham she realized he looked somewhat sad.

“I’m sorry.” He said. “I know this is hard on you… but I also know that this is what you truly want. There is no other way… for either of us.”

“For either of us?”

The question came out of her mouth before she even realized what she was saying.

“Why?” Sarah said. “If neither of us are happy about it… then why are we doing it?”

“Because there’s no one else.”

“Is that… really true?” She asked, cautiously. She thought of Raphael, and how much his company had meant to her these past few months.

Graham set his dinnerware down and considered her. He seemed to be conflicted.

“When I was growing up,” He began. “The love of my life was killed by an immigrant.”

Sarah folded her hands in her lap. Her eyes never wavered. She felt that he too, was trying to be vulnerable.

“At the time, the government was actively suppressing such stories.” He said. “They forced her parents to release a public statement about how they wished a white man had killed her instead.”

Sarah grimaced. This was standard behavior in woke America… a strange, self hatred of its own history and people.

“When they came to me and told me to do the same thing, I said I would.” Graham said. “They got the camera crews, they made it a live event, I went up on stage… and then I promised that I would kill not only the man who had done it, but the system that enabled him.”

“And they couldn’t stop you.”

“No.” Graham said. “Not just because of me, but because of everyone around me. Other people, who were sick of being victimized by the state, were beginning to fight back. It was becoming impossible to ignore the communist agenda that had infiltrated every aspect of our society. They had control over absolutely everything, and yet in a matter of years… their entire movement collapsed.”

“They simply didn’t have enough real power.” Sarah said quietly. “All they had was the apathy and ignorance of ordinary people.”

“Yes.” Graham said. “Thirty years ago a girl like you would have gone to high school, learned absolutely nothing but marxist propaganda, and then found herself in college where you would be formally indoctrinated into the ideology. But today… because in part because of the change in culture, but mostly because of your own drive- you have become a force to be reckoned with. Hayes had been raping young boys for forty years, and you were the one to bring him down.”

“He won’t be the last.”

“He will be the last to get away with it for as long as he did.”

Sarah felt her heart soar. Her doubts and reservations about what she was doing were beginning to fade away. This was it. He was the One. The one that could help her save the country.

“I’m being selfish.” She murmured. “I’m thinking about myself at a time like this when there are people we both know who have suffered… even killed.”

“It isn’t wrong to have reservations about this.” Graham said gently. “I understand what I am asking you to do involves sacrifices… and I understand that you have sacrificed a lot already, to be here with me.”

She nodded. Her face was tight.

“I’ve never been able to live a normal life.” She said. “For a while… these past three months… I almost thought I would be able to.” She felt as if she were about to cry. “A part of me… wants that more than anything.”

“You’re not going to live an ordinary life, Sarah.” Graham said. “You will live an extraordinary one.”

She nodded. She was trying to fight back her tears. She couldn’t cry here, in public, where people were undoubtedly watching them. She had to play the part of the perfect date. She forced herself to smile. Graham looked at her, his own expression tight.

“I’m sorry.” He said quietly. “But believe me I will do everything in my power to make you happy. I swear it.”

She believed it. She hated herself for being so selfish, for being unable to accept the wonderful man in front of her, who was everything she had ever dreamed of.

Graham was still looking at her. She wondered if he could tell that she was forcing her smile through her own misgivings.

Before she could speak again, however, there was a bit of a noise at the door.

“No, I told you, GET OUT!”

There was a scuffle: People turned through heads at the door as a large man struggled with someone trying to force his way through the door. People stared wide eyed as the door burst open.

The large man at the door let out a large yell as he was knocked onto his back. Someone stepped past him and into the restaurant.

“I told you… I have a reservation.” Raphael growled.

Sarah stood up.

“R-Raphael!” She gasped. She got her bearings, flushed furiously, and then sat back down. She turned away from him and looked back towards Graham. He was still watching her intently, his expression unreadable.

More men began to advance on Raphael, aggressively intent on throwing him out. Raphael glanced around at each of them, before turning his gaze back towards Sarah.

“Stop!” Graham commanded.

The entire room fell silent.

“He’s with me.” He said smoothly, as he held out his hand. “Please.”

The man who had been hit sat up, looking appalled. Before he could speak, however, another waiter stepped forward, looking back and forth nervously.

Raphael strode against the room, drew a chair for himself, and then sat next to Sarah. She stiffened, as he turned to look at her.

“What’s going on?” He whispered. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“I- I told you, it’s-“

“Raphael.” Graham said, smiling slightly. “The baseball star.”

Raphael looked at him and gave him a hard glare.

“And who are you?”

“Raphael, please.” Sarah said anxiously. “This isn’t… this isn’t what I want-“

“I am Baron Graham.” The man answered him. “I intend to marry Miss Carnell.”

“What?”

He glared back at her, and she felt herself shirking from his gaze. “You don’t want to marry this guy.” He said accusingly. Sarah felt her face tighten.

“But I do.” She said, her voice firm. “I have to.”

Graham looked at him. His expression was unreadable.

“Why?” Raphael asked. “Why do you have to do it?”

“For the country.” Sarah said, in a rush. “I want the people of this country to be happy, and I need to do everything I can for them to live fulfilling lives. If I balk from that… if I don’t use every resource at my disposal… I will be shirking my duty to the citizens of this country!”

She was shouting now. The sudden appearance of Raphael had brought her completely to tears. Raphael looked at her and said:

“Are you yourself not a citizen?”

She stared at him. She was at a complete loss for words.

“As a citizen, don’t you deserve happiness?” Raphael demanded. “Are you really going to be happy by running off with this guy, instead of the man you really want to be with?”

She removed her glasses and dabbed at her eye. She looked hopelessly at Graham. He was watching them intently. Sarah steeled herself.

“I do not.” She said quietly. “Pursuing happiness, at the expense of other people… it’s selfish. It’s not what I want. I don’t… I don’t want to be like my parents…”

She fell silent. She shook her head. She wiped her tears away with her sleeve, and tried to compose herself.

"You're not selfish." Raphael said quietly. He reached forward and took her hands in his, and squeezed them reassuringly. "I can't think… of a single person who thinks you are. So many people want the best for you, and want you be happy. Sarah… you deserve happiness too."

She looked at him, and then she lunged at his mouth into a kiss. She leaned into it so hard that she ended up falling out of her own chair, pushing him over and onto the floor. The restaurant around them burst into a shocked sort of applause as she sat up on top of him.

"I love you!" Sarah blurted out, pressing her hand into his chest. "I… want to be with you! Oh, I can't help it… why couldn't I let you go?"

Raphael smirked at her.

"I'm too good of a kisser."

The crowd laughed as she smacked him with her hand, and then huffed.

"I'm sorry." She said to Graham. "I feel as if… you're going to have to find someone else. I'm not who you're looking for."

Graham shook his head, as he got to his feet.

"No." He said quietly. "I was too unreasonable."

Sarah and Raphael straightened themselves and looked up at him.

"Sarah, we do have an obligation to society… but we have obligations to ourselves as well. We must follow our hearts, wherever they lead us. And your heart… belongs to another."

Sarah nodded, her expression set.

"I expect we'll see each other in the political world." Graham said. "We may not be husband and wife… but I expect great things from

you, regardless."

"Yes, sir." Sarah said stiffly. Raphael poked her in the side.

"Sir?"

She scowled at them, and then giggled as he poked her again.

"Q-quit it!"

Graham smiled at them.

"My best to you both." He said. "Raphael… take good care of her, alright?"

"Yes… I will."

Raphael pulled her to her feet, and they stood facing him.

"Until we meet again." Graham said, as Raphael pulled Sarah out into the street. The waiter watched them both leave, looking as if he was about to stop them, but Graham shook his head.

"Don't mind them." He said heavily. "I'll pay for the damage."

"Are you… certain sir?"

"I'm certain." He said. "What happened here today was a good thing. I wouldn't want them to be held responsible for something that was my fault."

He smiled to himself, and stared down at the table. And then he spoke, almost to himself:

"A woman like that… deserves happiness."

Sarah was smiling widely as she stepped out into the street.

"Wow." She said. "Wow." Raphael turned around and placed his hands around her waist, and spun her around. "You came for me like…. A knight in shining armor. The way you came barging in… you

were so cool!” He lifted her high up into the air, and she found herself laughing like a child.

“I almost didn’t come.’ Raphael confessed, as he set her down. “Lavender had to talk me into it. I thought it was over."

"So did I.” Sarah said breathlessly. They looked at each other. Sarah’s smile faded from her face.

“I’m sorry.” She said quietly, as she pressed her hand against his chest. “I put my career before you… All I could think about was all the good I could do. I wasn’t thinking about… what I really wanted.”

“I like that about you.” Raphael said quietly, as he took her hand in his. “I like that you’re so selfless. But I’m not going to let it get between us again, okay?”

“You better not.” Sarah said.

They looked at each other. There was nothing more to say.

“Let’s go home.” Raphael said. “Lavender and Angelica are waiting for us. I had Angelica save some of your cake.”

She giggled, and grabbed hold of his arm. “I’m glad.” She said, as he led her down the path. “That I have such great friends.”

Fin